MSc International Development Studies Thesis

Covid-19: a catalyst for change?

A political economy and political opportunity analysis of local humanitarian response in South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh

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Abstract

The humanitarian system has been subject to long-standing criticism over its pervasive imbalance of power between international and local humanitarian actors; compromising the effectiveness of humanitarian response. However, the Covid-19 pandemic heightened the reliance on local actors at a systemic scale. This research explores whether Covid-19 has played a role in shifting power to local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs) in three focus countries; South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh. It pays particular attention to two forms of power; namely relational power between actors and structural configurations of power. An original analytical framework is employed in conducting the analysis, which combines political economy and political opportunity analysis. Findings and analysis are informed by primary data collected via 20 semi-structed in-depth interviews with local humanitarian organisations across the three countries. This is complemented by two key expert interviews, a survey administered to international humanitarian organisations and analysis of secondary sources. Similarities for explaining key power imbalances in the pre-Covid humanitarian ecosystems are shared between the three countries. These pertain to the sustained treatment of LNNGOs as subordinates through inequitable access to funding and a dominant capacity discourse that ignores comparative advantages of LNNGOs. Findings suggest that the Covid-19 context has significantly improved the latter whilst sustaining imbalances in the former. Furthermore, findings have illustrated that the global pandemic has manifested very differently within the humanitarian contexts. Consequently, it offers different pathways for potential change. Finally, the research explores the perceptions of key humanitarian actors on the significance of Covid-19 for catalysing systemic change. It identifies increased political will and commitment, but limited structural change to date. The research contributes to promoting the importance of locally-rooted initiatives to ensure more sustainable and resilient response is leveraged across the humanitarian-development nexus.

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Abbreviations

C4C	Charter4Change
CBPF	Country-Based Pooled Funds
CCNF	Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Fund
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GHA	Global Humanitarian Assistance
GHPF	Global Humanitarian Policy Forum
GHRP	Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HCCT	Humanitarian Coordination Country Team
HNPW	Humanitarian Network and Partnerships Weeks
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LNNGO	Local and/or National Non-Governmental Organisation
NAHAB	National Alliance for Humanitarian Actors in Bangladesh
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organisation
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

1. Introduction

Humanitarian response is inherently political. According to Fast and Bennett (2020, p.16) "power is both the raw material shaping the sector's current technocracy and the fuel that energises its institutions, partnerships and decisions". In simpler terms, the humanitarian political economy is subject to a pervasive imbalance of power, manifested through inequitable relationships and access to resources. The system has been subject to long-standing criticism. Its incentive structures promote and sustain a top-down model (De Torrenté, 2013); whereby strategic decision-making is detached from the context and needs of crisis-affected populations (Barnett & Walker, 2015). Local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs) are consistently identified as the actors best placed to respond given their contextual knowledge, understanding of needs and proximity to crisis (Roepstorff, 2020, p.287). However, their agency is compromised through systemic domination by international actors (Barnett & Walker, 2015; Donini & Maxwell, 2013; Hilhorst, 2018).

A reform agenda seeking to rectify these issues was developed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). The outcome, articulated in the Grand Bargain (2016) has come to be known as 'localisation'. Albeit a contested policy agenda, in essence it seeks to enable a structural shift towards more locally-led response by enabling change in the relational role of humanitarian actors. In practical terms, it involves re-channelling funds and better systematic involvement of local actors in the development and implementation of response (Roepstorff, 2020, p.287). Despite the commitments signed by all major donors, multilaterals and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) little progress was realised in the years that followed (ALNAP, 2018; Barbalet, Bryant & Willits-King, 2020).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted an unprecedented shock to the entire humanitarian system, challenging existing power structures. It has shaped an operating context whereby the traditional humanitarian business model has been impeded by mobility and access barriers, whilst national and local actors have retained their position on the frontlines (Barbalet et al., 2020). This has resulted in increased reliance on LNNGOs, both for responding to the impacts of Covid-19 and other humanitarian crises. The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UNOCHA, 2020, p.5) Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 (GHRP) released in March 2020, stressed the need to support LNNGOs "given the key role they are playing in the crisis." Its global scale has also intensified pressure for international actors to honour their localisation commitments (Charter4Change, 2020, p.3). As a result, momentum has been generated amongst humanitarian researchers and practitioners that this may signify a shift towards a 'humanitarian rethink' where the nature of relationships between local and international humanitarian actors is fundamentally changed (Barbalet et al., 2020; Konyndryk & Saez, 2020; van Mierop, 2020; Spencer, 2020).

The thesis seeks to explore whether this has translated into practice. However, as stated by Cooley and Ron (2002, p.37), different contexts and 'humanitarian markets' of actor ecosystems shape variations

in outcomes. The impact of Covid-19 is likely to manifest differently in a fragile state such as South Sudan, compared to the world's most natural-disaster prone country Bangladesh, or the refugee-hosting Uganda. Furthermore, change is not definite. Some researchers deem that past crises have been catalysts for change (Kent, 2017; Walker & Maxwell, 2008) whereas others warn that existing power relations may also become entrenched (Barnett & Walker, 2015; Olson, 2000). Significantly, change within a political economy hinge on a shift in power, which warrants the question whether Covid-19 may act as the needed catalyst to address the existing imbalances.

1.1 Knowledge gap and relevance

As stated by Schenkenberg van Mierop (2020, n.p), there will be a 'before' and 'after' Covid-19 in humanitarian response. This unparalleled situation presents a knowledge gap by its very nature. It provides a unique research opportunity for understanding how the pandemic has impacted humanitarianism, and analysing what this means for the distribution of power in the sector. Additionally, Besiou and van Wassenhove (2020, p.136) argue that academic research needs to focus more closely on problems relevant to humanitarian practitioners to ensure impactful research towards effective reform. They identify the research gap of exploring the evolving role of stakeholders in facilitating local response (Besiou and van Wassenhove, 2020, p.138). Similarly, Roepstorff (2020, p.284) contends that researchers should examine how power is exercised and embedded in governance structures through emerging practices of aid localisation.

The relevance of the research extends beyond the importance of addressing these knowledge gaps. The shift of power to local organisations seeks to bridge the humanitarian-development nexus by facilitating more sustainable and efficient solutions to some of the world's most urgent problems (Barakat & Milton, 2020). Dependency on external assistance during protracted crises compromises development prospects (De Torrenté, 2013). 'Localisation' is about more than shifting power to LNNGOs; it is pivotal for development outcomes and the dignity of crisis-affected populations. The question now is if this shock of the pandemic will help shift policy intro practice.

1.2 Research objective and questions

The objective of this thesis is to employ an original analytical framework by combining political economy analysis and political opportunity analysis to answer the central question: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the agency of LNNGOs in humanitarian response and to what extent does it present a 'political opportunity' for shifting power to LNNGOs?* The research predominantly focuses on the experiences and perceptions of LNNGOs in South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh. The purposive selection of three countries with different humanitarian contexts and political climates enables a comparison of how a systemic shock may materialise differently. The primary research aim is to explore whether Covid-19 has played a role in shifting power to LNNGOs within the humanitarian political economy of each focus country. A secondary aim is to situate this analysis in the wider systemic context. The research pays particular attention to two forms of power; namely relational power

between actors and structural configurations of power. The following sub-questions have been articulated as building blocks to unpack the central question:

1. How did LNNGOs experience relational power dynamics prior to the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How has Covid-19 impacted mobilisation of humanitarian response on the ground?
3. How has the Covid-context impacted the distribution of power between LNNGOs and international humanitarian actors?
4. To what extent do humanitarian actors perceive Covid-19 as a 'political opportunity' to shift power to LNNGOs?

The thesis first provides an overview of relevant debates and discussions central to the research focus and analytical framework (Chapter 2). It proceeds to explain the research design and methodology (Chapter 3), before offering a contextual background of the humanitarian ecosystems in each focus country (Chapter 4). The research findings and analysis are then explored (Chapters 5-9), followed by a discussion and conclusion (Chapters 10-11).

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter aims to provide an overview of existing debates and discussions relevant to the key concepts of the research. First, it unpacks some of the central power imbalances that have given rise to the need for reform. Subsequently, it provides an overview of the 'localisation' debate, given its relevance for shaping the most recent reform agenda centred around facilitating more power to local humanitarian actors. This is followed by an overview of discussions surrounding the relationship between crisis and reform. Finally, the key debates relevant to the analytical foundation of the research is discussed.

2.1 Systemic power imbalances

Calls for reform stem from the need to resolve systemic power imbalances. It pertains specifically to the shaping of agential roles, relationships and distribution of resources in the humanitarian sector. The manifestation through power dynamics is multifaceted, as evidenced in the debates and discussions presented in this section.

2.1.1 Roles and resources

The impact of institutional structures on shaping actor dynamics and relationships have been extensively researched. Barnett and Walker (2015, p.134) refer to the 'Humanitarian Club' as controlling both resources and the agenda. Donors from OECD countries and UN agencies are at the core of this traditional model, and are 'orbited' by a handful of INGOs regarded as an oligopoly who receive the majority of the funds (Barnett and Walker, 2015, p.134). Bennet (2013, p.375) perceives the humanitarian system is often perceived as reproducing neo-colonial or imperial forms of domination by the Global North. Similarly. Donini and Maxwell (2013) contend that control over decision-making and financial resources gives international agencies a structural dominance over national actors, resulting in sustained inequalities and marginalisation of local actors. Consequently, many researchers point to excessive centralisation, whereby strategic decision-making is tied to resources and often far removed from the crisis zones (Barnett & Walker, 2015; van Brabant & Patel; 2017). According to Barnett (2013) this explains why first receivers of institutional humanitarian aid becomes restricted to a limited number of UN agencies, INGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Researchers stress that humanitarian action cannot be viewed in isolation from its political environment. For example, Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) argue that humanitarian space is an 'arena' shaped by a multitude of actors. In researching donor effectiveness Gulrajani (2014, p.107) emphasises the need to recognise that political environments are shaped by localised leadership and governance structures, but also the wider global political climate. Similarly, De Torrenté (2013, p.608) argues that power asymmetries are present at every level. Unpacking these involves understanding the identity, intentions, decisions and actions of the diverse array of providers within the humanitarian aid landscape. Others attribute dynamics as molded by an excessive focus on resources opposed to quality of relationships

(Donini, 2010). Cooley and Ron (2002) explore the powerful roles of material incentives manifested through transnational institutional conditioning, which shape the roles of INGOs. They contend that market-like incentive structures promote rent-seeking behaviour and shape competition rather than collaboration in humanitarian action. Similarly, Parker (2016) argues perverted incentive structures sustain the top-heavy system. Many international actors are competing for funds amongst themselves as opposed to enabling equitable access for national NGOs (Parker, 2016).

Others have theorised the politicisation of technical capacity. Gulrajani (2014, p.94) argues that donors directly influence organisational contexts by shaping the technical aid systems. She contends that donors incorrectly view technical systems for aid management as objective tools, without recognition of their social and political consequences. Stephen (2017) writes that local actors are depicted in the image of their northern partners which emphasises financial and administrative capacities. Similarly, Hilhorst (2018, p.5) states the dominant capacity discourse depicts local responders in terms of what they are missing, thus fail to recognise their strengths, which contributes to reinforcing unbalanced power relations.

Discussions have also specifically focused on relational power dynamics between agents for insight on what shapes agential roles. Hilhorst (2018) urges humanitarian scholars and practitioners to consider how power is enacted. She emphasises the importance of analysing discourse, power relations and the multiplicity of interests in order to understand the agency of both aid workers and crisis-affected communities themselves (2018, p.1). In doing so, she argues of the importance to understand how the roles of humanitarian actors shape their operating contexts along the 'aid chain' by enacting power through social negotiation with other actors. Similarly, Cooley and Ron (2002, p.37) stress that contexts "create different types of humanitarian markets" which shapes variations in outcomes of behaviour. Barnett (2000) asserts that humanitarian organisations are motivated by values and organisational identity, resulting in a culture of self-criticism to continue evolving and adapting. According to Lewin et al. (2018) international humanitarian organisations are increasingly questioning their own business models as intermediaries.

De Torrenté (2013, p.613) found that multiple surveys repeat findings that aid recipients regard humanitarian organisations as disconnected from their needs and understanding of local customs and culture. Woodhill (2010) explores the paradox that unfolds whereby organisations justify retaining control of aid delivery to ensure it reaches intended beneficiaries in urgent crisis at the cost of identifying what 'beneficiaries' actually want or need. Roepstorff (2020, p.284) describes this as the dichotomy of care and control; helping vulnerable communities simultaneously subjects them to practices that lack accountability. By neglecting 'downward accountability', prioritised accountability relationships are directed towards funders, internal decision-making structures, media and even the authorities that facilitate their access (De Torrenté, 2013, p.613). Painting this issue with a broad-brush

explanation, Barnett and Walker (2015, p.131) contend that donor interests in effect trump local interests, simply because their voices are louder.

2.1.2 Institutional access for mobilising response

Several researchers discuss the implications around access for delivering humanitarian aid and assistance. Barnett and Walker (2015, p.130) highlight the importance of recognising the inherent complexity of the operating environment, beyond the control of humanitarian actors. Governments have the primary responsibility to respond and protect, but may not have the resources or willingness to do so (Besiou & van Wassenhove, 2020). The conditions for aid organisations' presence must often be negotiated with political and military forces as they have the power to accept or refuse access for international responders (De Torrenté, 2013, p.626). Power politics are therefore at play, whereby the presence of humanitarian actors may serve to symbolize legitimacy, failure, or open nations up to scrutiny. Debating from a different perspective, Roepstorff (2020) contends it is problematic that local first responders such as LNNGOs, civil society or volunteer groups are ignored compared to response by established humanitarian actors. This results in sustaining a misconception regarding the reality of response mobilisation (Roepstorff, 2020, p.284).

Van Brabant and Patel (2017) contend that it is often easier for local and national NGOs to negotiate access, compared to international actors. Where access has been either denied, terminated or the security risks are too high for international actors, they often rely on local partners. This 'reliance' can take various forms. One analysis looked at the role of remote management and programming, and the implications for humanitarian response (Donini & Maxwell, 2013). The authors raise concerns over transferring security risks to local actors, and that quality of operations may be compromised due to accountability and quality concerns (Donini & Maxwell, 2013, p.383). It echoes the approach criticised by Barnett and Walker (2015) whereby local actors are reduced to sub-contractors.

2.2 Localisation

Localisation refers to both a contested policy agenda, and the need to facilitate a more bottom-up and locally-driven system by shifting power to local actors. However, the operationalisation of the process to get there is subject to much discussion and debate. This is largely due different interpretations of how to operationalise localisation pathways, and who constitutes 'local'. It is therefore important to recognise that it extends beyond the formal reform agenda, which is predominantly grounded in policy rather than practice. This section aims to illustrate the debates informing these statements.

2.2.1 Operationalisation in practice

'Localisation' is not a new concept. It has been shaped by the many debates centred around examining power asymmetries in partnerships between international and local NGOs (De Torrenté, 2013), and the need for top-down accountability to local populations and partners (Barnett and Walker, 2015). However, the birth of 'localisation' as a buzzword in the humanitarian sector originates from the Grand Bargain. The agenda culminated from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and is signed by all major

donors, multilaterals and international non-governmental organisations. It seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid (The Grand Bargain, 2016, p.1). Key commitments on localisation include more funding to local actors 'as directly as possible', aiming for a minimum target of 25% of humanitarian funding; investing in long-term institutional capacity of local actors; promoting equal partnerships between international and local actors; and better integration with local coordination mechanisms (Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, 2018, p.8).

However, there is lack of consensus on the definition of localisation, resulting in a debate that remains stuck in policy rather than practice. Steets et al. (2016) argue vague definitions are intentional to enable political consensus around commitments, which inherently leads to inconsistencies in practice. In the Grand Bargain, localisation is the commitment to "provide more support and funding tools for local and national responders" (The Grand Bargain, 2016, p.1). The humanitarian network ALNAP (2018, p.21) define 'localisation' as "supporting the governments and civil societies of crisis-affected states to play the lead role in humanitarian response", uniquely identifying governments as key actors in the agenda. Harris and Tuladhar (2019, p.33) simply define it as the 'transfer of control to local actors.' In contrast, Barbalet et al (2020, p.2) oppose implication that capacities and approaches of international actors should simply be emulated or 'transferred' to the local level. Resultingly, they distinguish localisation from local humanitarian action and leadership, by putting the onus on donors and international actors. MacGinty (2015, p.840) promotes the notion that localisation is an activity, rather than just a goal, and occurs within complicated webs of power and politics (MacGinty. 2015, p.840).

Van Brabant and Patel (2017) argue that different interpretations of the localisation agenda lead to significantly different trajectories. One interpretation may promote a 'multi-nationalisation of international NGOs' through affiliate structures. In short, it retains a central role for INGOs in coordinating and planning response and leaves a relatively small role for LNNGOs without international affiliates (Van Brabant & Patel, 2017, p.4). The other interpretation is transformative whereby localisation means stronger national leadership and capacities by shifting decision-making and resource power. Its ultimate vision would include a systemic reform of the humanitarian political economy (Van Brabant & Patel, 2017, p.5). This vision entails different potential outcomes, influenced by the role of government authorities, the ability to form LNGGO networks and wider crisis management infrastructures.

2.2.2 Conceptualisation of the 'local'

The conceptualisation of the 'local' is also subject to debate. The 'local' is recognised as better placed to respond effectively and efficiently given context knowledge, better understanding of needs, and proximity to crisis (Roepstorff, 2020; Ward, 2020). But who constitutes 'local'? Roepstorff (2020) warns that the debate must include a critical discussion on this conceptualisation. She argues local should not be perceived as opposing the international; framing the discourse in binary terms risks perpetuating issues through a narrative of exclusivity rather than complementarity (Roepstorff, 2020,

p.291). Many other researchers emphasise this complexity. Paffenholz (2015, p.857) highlights the binary 'Eurocentric' perspective risks developing a blindness towards the dominant role of local elites, and the role of non-Western international actors. Translocal and transcultural practices thus influence the complex dynamics (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010).

Localisation is inherently political, whereby titles afford actors with power. Gibbons et al. (2019, p.499) highlight the concern around identifying who legitimately represents local interests. This gives rise to debate surrounding whether the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence conflict with the ability for international actors to partner with local and national actors (Gibbons et al., 2019, p.499). MacGinty (2015) argues that 'localisation' should be viewed critically, as contextual and relational, to unpack who defines and represents it. In effect, he asserts the 'local' must not be romanticized as a simple solution, nor vilified for lack of progress. In a similar vein, Fast and Bennett (2020) emphasise that inefficiencies in humanitarian response will not automatically be solved by shifting to a locally-driven model. They emphasise the key message that "local humanitarian action is not always better, but without it, humanitarian action is always worse" (Fast & Bennett, p.19, 2020). Others criticise the debate itself as predominantly situated in the Global North, thus inherently diminishing local leadership roles in driving the agenda (Van Brabant and Patel, 2017). To this effect, Gómez (2021, p.1347) contends "despite the good intentions, localisation presents a biased understanding of the local and its agency in transforming humanitarianism". He therefore argues that focus should instead be placed on recognising how local actors are already actively transforming humanitarian response.

2.2.3 Humanitarian-Development nexus

The debate on shifting power to local actors is embedded in the humanitarian-development nexus. The official Grand Bargain document maps out ten key points informing the localisation agenda. One of these stipulates to "enhance engagement between humanitarian and development actors", to ensure alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and "invest in durable solutions" for crisis-affected populations (The Grand Bargain, 2016, p.14). The need for an integrated approach reflects long-standing criticism. For example, De Torrenté (2013, p.626) urged that contemporary humanitarian challenges are often protracted, thus temporary solutions of the traditional humanitarian model stifle development opportunities (2013, p.626).

Barakat and Milton (2020) researched how localisation is situated across the nexus. They emphasise its significance for fostering locally-rooted development through more sustainable and effective provision of relief. However, they also argue that centralisation of power and resources in the humanitarian system means that the understanding of 'localisation' is inherently different from the 'local' in development spheres (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p.150). Echoing central tenets of the localisation debate, researchers emphasise the need to foster resilience by promoting the use of existing capacities and processes rather than external assistance (Chandler, 2015; Hilhorst, 2018); and recognise the potential of local systems and leadership for more sustainable response (Fanning & Fullwood-Thomas, 2019, p.3).

2.3 Reform

Some researchers argue that failures in the face of major crises have given rise to reform; arising out of necessity to adapt (Kent, 2017; Konyndryk & Worden, 2019; Walker and Maxwell, 2014). Kent (2017) claims that catalysts for change often stem from pressures generated by significant events in the external environment. For example, Walker & Maxwell (2008) highlight that calls for reform arose in response to the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. This resulted in the establishment of the Sphere Project, which sets the standards and common principles in humanitarian response, known as the Humanitarian Charter (Walker and Maxwell, 2014). Similarly, shortly after the crisis in Darfur and Indian Ocean Tsunami, the UN's 2005 Humanitarian Reform Initiative was established to improve coordination (Konyndryk & Worden, 2019, p.25). More recently after the failures of the humanitarian response to the Haiti earthquake in 2011, the UN introduced the 2011 Transformative Agenda, which sought to push for accountability to affected populations (Konyndryk & Worden, 2019). Shenkenberg van Mierop (2020) similarly argues that humanitarian 'mega-crises' give rise to reform, quoting the Covid-19 pandemic as the most recent shock to the system. From the development perspective, research focused on how reconfigurations of aid regimes reflect the impact of wider geopolitical changes such as the global financial crisis (Mawdsely, Murray & Overton, 2017).

Other researchers contest whether 'reform' is anything other than artificial. Streets et al. (2016) argue that reform conflict with the self-interests of those with power, and contest the transformational nature of previously mentioned initiatives. Using the term 'organised hypocrisy', they draw attention to the use of vague policies (Steets et al., 2016). Similarly, Olson (2000) warns that crises are awarded meaning by those who command powerful positions. Consequently, these very actors determine the resulting policies and allocation of resources. Another analysis of past reform argues that some attempts to reform have resulted in reinforced and increased centralisation as opposed to widening inclusion (Barnett & Walker, 2015). They argue the 2005 initiative for more transparent and efficient use of aid led to prioritisation of generalisable empirical data at the expense of less quantifiable data such as local knowledge; thus, remaining detached from local circumstances (Barnett & Walker, 2015, p.134).

Several papers argue that 'reforms' have not involved meaningful challenges to underlying power structures (Bennet et al, 2016; Barnett & Walker, 2015) or institutional architecture (Sandvik, 2016; Woodhill, 2010). Sandvik (2016) dismisses discussions around paradigm shift as an institutionalised feature of humanitarianism. Woodhill (2010) contends that proposed solutions have retained a primary focus on money and funding streams, doing little to shift the underlying institutional power dynamics and quality of relationships. Similarly, Spiegel (2017) argues real change requires those in power to renounce their authority and hold on funding. Others conclude that true reform rests outside dominant systemic structures, whereby non-traditional actors and technological developments are likely to be the catalyst for shifting power to affected communities (Barnett & Walker, 2015, p.137).

2.4 Analytical foundation

This section provides an overview of key debates and discussions relevant to the analytical frameworks that will be leveraged in the thesis, namely political economy and political opportunity analysis.

2.4.1 Political Economy analysis

Political economy approaches are inherently interested in how power is produced, distributed and contested. It explores the interaction between structural contexts and the agents within it (Copestake & Williams, 2012). However, there are significant variations in how this analysis is operationalised in practice. A brief overview of three key distinctions is presented here. Firstly, between structure-oriented and actor-oriented approaches. The structure-agency question is an integral part of both social theory and political science, focusing on the interaction of political context and conduct (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p.73). Structural approaches predominantly engage in contextual analysis of political, social and economic events (Hay, 2002, p.94). It emphasises the importance of institutions (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2002; Rodrik, 2014), and how incentives and rewards shape outcomes (Cohen & Werker, 2008; De Mesquita & Smith, 2009). Actor-oriented analysis on the other hand focuses on the agency, actions and capacity of actors (Hay, 2002, p.94). Central to this is understanding what drives interests, and asking whether people have the space and capacity to drive change (Hudson, Marquette & Waldock., 2016). The main criticism for both orientations is that they over-emphasise either structure or agency, without adequately considering their integrated nature (Copestake & Williams; 2012; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014).

The second distinction relates to temporal dimensions of trends. Hudson & Leftwich (2014, p.5) provide an overview of "three generations of political economy of development". The first generation set in the 1990s predominantly focused on good-governance issues. The second generation saw political economy consolidated in many bilateral donor frameworks (such as DFID's Drivers of Change). This emphasised the need to understand what shapes operational contexts, including historical, institutional, structural and political elements. Finally, the third generation is dominantly influenced by "assumptions, concepts and methods drawn from economics" (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p.5). This focuses on how incentives, interests and institutions shape how agents behave, both in terms of shaping policy and practice of development. Whaites (2017) contends that despite variations through time, key drivers have remained focused on structure, institutions and agency.

However, Hudson and Leftwich (2014) argue that the 'inherently political' has been lost over time. They warn that political economy approaches too often focus on the "economics of politics" which lacks the tools to analyse the "inner politics" of what shapes or thwarts change. This is echoed through self-reflection by Zetter (2019, p.8) who admits that his economics-focused analysis lacks the ability to fully engage in unpacking contingent structures of power. To this effect, Hudson and Leftwich (2014, p.5) promote a lens for analysis to inform a fourth generation of trends. Their proposed framework promotes a level of analysis that interprets 'micro' politics prioritising the "the distinctively political

about politics – power, interests, agency, ideas, the subtleties of building and sustaining coalitions, and the role of contingency" (2014, p.5). Similarly, Tanner and Allouche (2011) critique dominant mainstream models for assuming that policy models can be linear and apolitical. They also emphasise the correlation between ideas, power and resources; highlighting the need to study how these are conceptualised, negotiated and implemented by different groups across levels.

The final distinction relates to differences between practitioner-developed political economy analysis frameworks, and those stemming from academia. Political economy analysis is frequently leveraged by development and humanitarian practitioners (Collinson, 2003; Copestake & Williams, 2012; Whaites, 2017). Within the practitioner realm, it has been highlighted as a useful tool to steer away from focus on technical fixes, towards a better understanding of local contexts and politics (Grindle, 2011). Consequently, it is often branded as a tool to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of practitioner's operations. The dominant criticism of these approaches is that they lack reflexivity of their own role and impact on operational environments as practitioners (Hudson et al., 2014).

In the academic realm, researchers have also used political economy to study specific topics relevant to humanitarianism. This includes aid effectiveness (De Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Gulrajani, 2014), transnational actions of INGOs (Cooley & Ron, 2002), protracted refugee crises situated within the humanitarian-development nexus (Zetter, 2019), peacebuilding (Kappler, 2015), conflict (Collinson, 2003), and natural disasters (Cohen & Werker, 2008). Some examples have already been discussed in Section 2.2 (Cooley & Ron, 2002; Gulrajani, 2014; Mawdsely et al., 2017; Zetter, 2019). Furthermore, despite not explicitly applying political economy analysis, much of the literature discussed in that section provide valuable insight by encapsulating integral components relating to power and politics in the humanitarian system. Notwithstanding, there is a gap in regards to academic papers using political economy as an explicit perspective on localisation and local humanitarian response more broadly, which this research seeks to fill.

Finally, power is central to political economy analysis, yet manifests itself in different ways. Copestake and Williams (2012) emphasise power imbalances are identified through barriers for change. Rodrik (2014) emphasises the importance of recognising the role of ideas in shaping interest as opposed to the more commonly assumed vice versa. Taking an inverse approach, Collinson (2003, p.1) understands vulnerability as the antithetical of power. Vulnerability is not a deficit of resources but rather a powerlessness in relation to political and economic processes. Power is therefore held by those who control the exchange of commodities (material and non-material) at different levels (Collinson, 2003). Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (2002) distinguish between de jure (formal/authorised) and de facto power (informal/not institutionalised). This has implications in analytical terms, whereby de jure focuses on the way power is embedded in institutional structures and how it is exercised by agents within these confines. De facto on the other hand affects outcomes but is more temporary.

2.4.2 Political Opportunity analysis

To complement the political economy perspective, political opportunity analysis will also be utilised. Political opportunity analysis is often leveraged in sociology and political science. It stems from Social Movement Theory which is concerned with the study of change. It seeks to explain why and how social mobilisation occurs, and its implications (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald., 1996). Meyer and Minkoff (2004, p.1457) define the basic premise of political opportunity as "exogenous factors [that] enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilisation". Despite the most common application of analysing social protest movements, they assert it can be applied to study change in social mobility dynamics. Giugni (2011) draws attention to the challenge of identifying which external factors can be attributed to enabling the social movement. Kitschelt (1986) emphasises that political opportunities do not solely stem from political landscapes, but can also relate to institutional arrangements and configurations of resources. As evidenced, several definitions can be operationalised. To this effect Meyer and Minkoff (2004, p.1458) stress the importance of clearly defining political opportunities for whom and for what, to retain the analytical value.

In contrast to the often structurally-dominant conceptualisation of political opportunity, Tarrow (2011) takes an integrated agency focus. In doing so, Tarrow (2011, p.163) defines it as "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure." He identifies situational factors that are likely to affect the prospect of success. These are increased access to participation for new actors, access to influential allies, evidence of instability of political alignment, and splits emerging within the elite (Tarrow, 2011, p.164). The central distinction is not purely focused on what structural changes have been made, but how it has affected the expectations of agents. Similarly, Meyer and Minkoff (2004, p.1463) emphasise that political opportunity relates to theoretical questions regarding the relationship between structure and agency, explored by the interplay between context and enabled action. There is debate regarding the intentionality of actors and their awareness or identification of a 'political opportunity'. Tarrow (2011) regards activists as rationally responding to clear signals, whereas others question whether mobilisation is calculated (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Consequently, this requires a critical reflection on whether the actions of different interrelated actors in facilitating change are complementary or not (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004).

2.4.3 Analytical intersection

Political economy and political opportunity share an important analytical intersection. The former seeks to understand the distribution of power in contexts; why and how things are the way they are (Whaites, 2017). It can provide a useful tool for understanding how power structures either facilitate or block change. Political opportunity on the other hand is interested in how specific dimensions of these political environments, mobilise change (Tarrow, 2011, p.163). In other words, it seeks to identify specific catalysts for change. The concept of 'contingency' in political economies can be used to describe the

intersection between the two. In simple terms, the operationalisation of contingency acts to counter the belief that power structures are static with predetermined outcomes through prescribed opportunities, constraints and incentives (Hudson & Leftwich. 2014, p.99). This opens up the discourse for considering that political economies can be shaped by unforeseen events or 'windows of opportunity'. These contingencies can have significant consequences, by either shifting or breaking path dependencies (Shapiro & Bedi, 2017 cited in Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p.99). In other words, political opportunities can alter political economies if there is increased room for manoeuvre to mobilise political change.

3. Research design and methodology

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive account of the research design and methodology. First, it details the operationalisation of the analytical framework and concepts to guide exploration of the research questions. Next, it presents the methods and techniques used for data collection and analysis. A transparent discussion is also provided to reflect on the validity and reliability of the methods and data collected.

3.1 Defining the analytical and conceptual framework

The analytical framework derives from a combination of Hudson and Leftwich's (2014) political economy analysis framework and Tarrow's (2011) political opportunity analysis. The former has been selected due to its virtue in interpreting the inner politics of development contexts, situating the analysis of power at its core. The model is based on the core belief that structure is a medium for agency and vice versa (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p.75). It seeks to understand how institutions and structures shape what agents can and cannot do (or think of doing), and how they provide the resources for agents to shape the context. It emphasises the importance of exploring how agents interpret their political contexts and interests. This includes identifying what forms of collective agency are feasible, what political work is necessary to facilitate change and if there is room for manoeuvre (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014, p.107-108). The final point illustrates the inherent connection to political opportunity. The research adopts Tarrow's (2011, p.163) definition of political opportunity as the "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure". It has been selected due to its attention to both structural and agential factors, aligning with the research intention to obtain insight into the perspectives of LNNGOs on the ground. Combined, political economy provides the analytical foundation enabling the political opportunity analysis by first exploring to what extent Covid-19 has altered the 'dimensions of the political environment'.

3.1.1 Key concepts

The author has adapted key concepts from both approaches to analyse change within the humanitarian system, complemented by insights from the theoretical framework, as presented below.

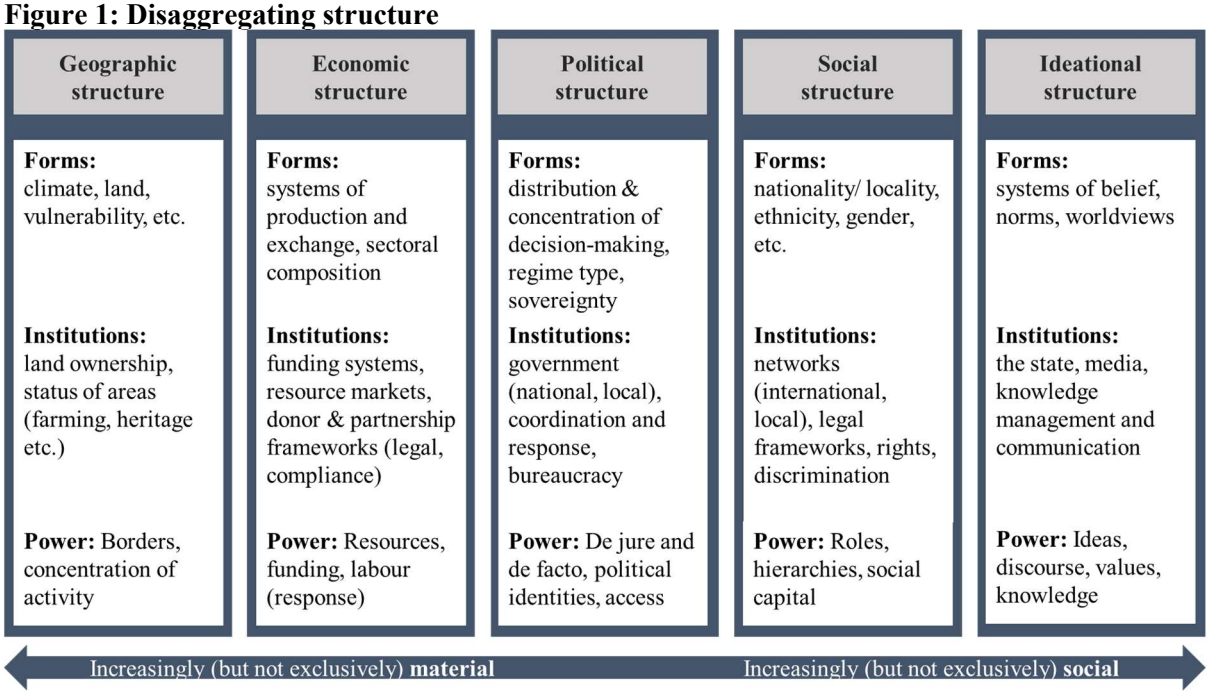
Agency

Defined as the ability of agents to "consciously deliberate and act strategically to realise their intentions" (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014, p.79). 'Strategically' refers to the ability to interpret their options through examination of how power operates in that context. In practice, this manifests though organising, framing, choice and action. It is therefore both about autonomy and capacity to act. For the purpose of this research, the primary agents of focus are LNNGOs. However, all humanitarian actors are relevant agents (governments, INGOs, UN agencies, vulnerable populations, etc.).

Structure

According to Hudson and Leftwich (2014, p.79) five types of structures are deemed relevant for organising contexts: geographic, economic, political, social and ideological. These contain and express distinct forms of power, which are mediated through both formal and informal institutional arrangements. They are seen as providing the resources and opportunities for agents to leverage, but they also impose constraints (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014, p.79). Understanding how political agents interact within these contexts is key for understanding how dynamics and power is contested. Figure 1 provides the authors adaptation of relevant structures and manifestations of power.

Figure 1: Disaggregating structure



Source: Author's adaptation of Hudson & Leftwich's (2014, p.78) 'Disaggregating structure' figure

Power

Power is a complex and multifaceted concept, as illustrated in 2.3. It stems from various structural and agential sources and expressed in different ways. Power is often leveraged to describe relationships between agents. Therefore, as a relational and relative concept, it is important to recognise that 'balance of power' may fluctuate across issues (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014, p.83). Importantly, change can occur when the balance of power is altered. The power typology provided in Figure 1 aims to outline forms of power relevant to this research, stemming from the theoretical overview in 2.3. However, please note that the disaggregation is oversimplified for the purpose of illustration.

Discourse

According to Hudson and Leftwich (2014, p.88), ideas are an integral component for shaping, interpreting, sustaining and legitimising the interests that determine the institutional and structural environments. They define the political identities of agents, shape motivations and frame prospective change outcomes. This thesis operationalises the broad concept of 'ideas' slightly differently. It will

focus on how 'dominant ideas' manifest through the capacity discourse identified as a power imbalance (Gulrajani, 2014; Hilhorst, 2015).

Roles
The 'roles' awarded agents through relationships are a reflection of their political identities. However, these are not viewed as static, but rather subject to negotiation with other actors (Hilhorst, 2018).

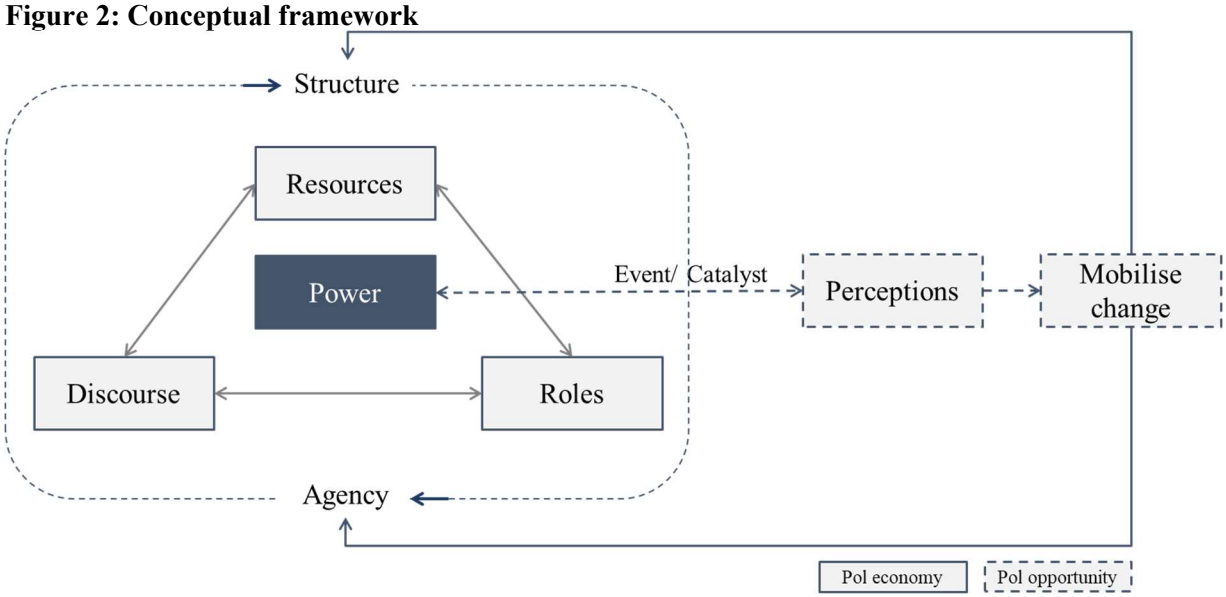
Perceptions and mobilising change
As part of Tarrow's (2011) conceptualisation of political opportunity, agents' perceptions of a specific event matter for shaping the change outcome. 'Mobilising change' at a systemic level is therefore contingent on these perceptions.

'Shift of power' replaces localisation
In broad terms, 'localisation' represents the systemic shift of power to local organisations to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response. However, as evidenced in the theoretical framework, it is also a political and contested term. For analytical purposes, shift of power to LNNGOs is based on insights from the research subjects rather than directly associated with the localisation agenda.

3.2 Operationalisation of concepts

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 illustrates how the key concepts and analytical framework is used to explore the key research question *'How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the agency of LNNGOs in humanitarian response and to what extent does it present a 'political opportunity' for shifting power to LNNGOs?*

Figure 2: Conceptual framework



The primary aim of the research is to explore whether Covid-19 has played a role in enabling a shift of power to LNNGOs in each focus country. A secondary aim is to situate this in the wider systemic context. The analytical framework provides complementary tools for exploring this. Both analytical approaches are concerned with structural components and agents within these environments. In regards to agents, political economy focuses more on the 'agency' of actors (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014)

whereas political opportunity focuses on the perceptions of agents (Tarrow, 2011, p.164). Combined, the analytical intersection promotes understanding to what extent Covid-19 has impacted key power structures (roles, resources and discourse), and what impact this has had on the agency of LNNGOs. If this is perceived to increase incentives to mobilise a shift of power to LNNGOs, it may become a political opportunity if capitalised. In effect, the research takes stock of factors that may inhibit or facilitate the shift of power to LNNGOs within the novel Covid-context.

Table 1 provides an overview of how the research questions are instrumentalised through the research. Each sub-question acts as a building block with an individual aim, which is used to guide the structure of the analysis. First, to establish how LNNGOs have experienced relational power dynamics prior to the Covid-19 pandemic to set a baseline for studying change (Chapter 5). This includes exploring the from-the-ground perspectives on how the 'localisation agenda' has manifested in each context, as it is a relevant indicator for relational dynamics. Second, to obtain an understanding of how Covid-19 has impacted the institutional operating context and its impact on the mobilisation of response (Chapter 6). Third, to obtain insight into how the agency of LNNGOs have been affected (Chapters 7-8). Finally, the thesis seeks to understand whether there is increased evidence, or momentum, for change amongst humanitarian actors due to Covid-19 (Chapter 9). The full impact of Covid-19 is still unknown and dynamically evolving. However, this research will facilitate a more nuanced understanding about whether the pandemic has increased the potential to shift power dynamics.

Table 1: Operationalisation of concepts and instruments

Research sub-questions	Analytical lens	Instruments[1]	Key concepts
1. How did LNNGOs experience relational power dynamics prior to the Covid-19 pandemic?	PE: examine the underlying power structures in each context affecting LNNGOs	*Interview Qs:* hum ecosystem relationships with various actors/ perception regarding localisation / key issues / existing barriers *Survey:* perception on INGO roles and partnerships / 'local' affiliates → purpose: ensure there is a consistent understanding of 'localisation' across respondents	Structure Agency Power: resources, roles, discourse
2. How has Covid-19 impacted mobilisation of humanitarian response on the ground?	PE: examine the Covid-context and changes	*Interview Qs:* institutional context (coordination of Covid-response) / mobility / involvement in response / perception of other humanitarian actors' involvement *Survey:* impact on mobility, partnerships, roles and resources	Structures: economic, political, & geographic Power: access, resources, de jure vs de facto
3. How has the Covid-context impacted the distribution of power between local and international humanitarian actors?	PE: analyse the impact on the 'balance of power' (note: this includes the analysis of	*Interview Qs:* how pandemic has affected localisation issues and barriers / impact on partnership dynamics (local, national, international) / funding and resource landscape	Power: resources, roles, discourse Agency Structure

[1] The instruments stem from the research methods (see 3.3)

	multiple forms of power) PO: indication of increased 'room for manoeuvre'	*Survey:* impact on roles, resources, localisation commitments *Secondary sources:* review of funding landscape	
4. To what extent do humanitarian actors perceive Covid-19 as a 'political opportunity' to shift power to LNNGOs?	PO: analyse the meaning humanitarian actors (LNNGOs; INGOs; donors) attribute to Covid-19	*Interview Q's:* positive and negative effects / momentum or opportunity for change [LNNGOs] *Survey:* impact on locally-led response / catalyst for change [INGOs] *Webinars & secondary sources:* explore donor/system-wide perceptions	Perceptions Mobilising change
			PE = Political Economy / PO = Political Opportunity

3.3 Methods and techniques for data collection and analysis

This section provides an overview of the research methods and techniques. The research has been conducted independently. However, it has benefited from liaising with the Charter4Change by gaining access to its extensive network of humanitarian organisations. The Charter4Change was established as a commitment to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. It aims to facilitate localisation of humanitarian aid by addressing "imbalances and inequity in the global humanitarian system" (Charter4Change, 2016). Its eight-point charter stipulates tangible commitments for INGOs to change their ways of working with local partners, based on the Grand Bargain commitments (Charter4Change, 2016). To date, it is endorsed by 440 LNNGOs from 57 countries, and signed by 38 INGOs (Charter4Change, n.d).

3.3.1 Rationale for country selection

The thesis explicitly sought to explore how the Covid-19 context has manifested in different humanitarian contexts. The key selection criterion was based on identifying countries with varied humanitarian challenges and different political climates, thus shaping different structural and actor ecosystems. Furthermore, it was important that a sufficient number of LNNGOs were part of the Charter4Change endorser network, because this constitutes the sample population of interview participants. Finally, to counter the risk of a language barrier, it was important that local participants would be likely to speak English (the research language). Based on this criteria, South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh were identified as the most suitable options.

Reflecting on the nature of crises, South Sudan was ranked as the third most fragile state globally in 2020 and has experienced intermittent civil war since December 2013 (Fragile State Index, 2021). It presents one of the most urgent yet protracted contemporary humanitarian challenges. Secondly, Uganda hosts a protracted refugee situation, in part due to the generous open-door policy for refugees maintained by the Government of Uganda (UNHCR, 2019). It has the largest refugee population in Africa, a large proportion of which come from South Sudan (ACAPS, 2021b). Lastly, Bangladesh is one of the worlds' most natural disaster-prone countries (NAHAB, 2020). It also hosts the largest refugee camp in the world, Cox's Bazaar (ACAPS, 2021a). Chapter 4 presents a comprehensive overview of each context.

Despite their differences they are united by a significant characteristic; all three countries are embedded in the intersection of the humanitarian-development nexus. This is particularly relevant as 'localisation' stems from the motivation to shift the short-sighted view of humanitarian response as temporary, towards more sustainable interventions that promote resilience (2.4.3). Researching three different contexts therefore shines light on how power imbalances in the humanitarian sector may impact wider civil society and development prospects.

3.3.2 Primary data: collection and analysis

Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Semi-structured interviews represent the main data-collection tool. Participants were approached from the list of Charter4Change endorsers in the three focus countries. The Charter4Change endorsers represent LNNGOs who are committed to the 'localisation' agenda, and seek to hold international partners accountable to their commitments. Consequently, they represent a group of organisations who have illustrated interest in the research topic, which the researcher hoped would incentivise participation. In total, 38 LNNGOs were contacted and of these, 20 organisations agreed to interview (Table 2).

Table 2: Participant selection

Countries	C4C endorsers (sample)	Contacted	Interviewed
South Sudan	20	C4C contacted all. Direct contact established with 12	7
Uganda	55	13	6
Bangladesh	19	13	7
Total	94	38	20

The sample of organisations in Uganda and Bangladesh were reviewed based on certain selection criteria. Firstly, the research aimed to approach organisations with experience working with international actors to facilitate research about perceived dynamics. Additionally, organisations involved in leadership positions within humanitarian coordination fora, such as local and international networks were also purposely selected. This decision reflects the desire to obtain insights into collaboration amongst actors, and because these participants may have insights into trends beyond their own experiences. Due to GDPR reasons, the email addresses of contact persons in each organisation could not be shared by the C4C. Therefore, each organisation was contacted via their Executive Directors using email addresses made available on their official websites. However, participants in the case of South Sudan, this information was not as readily available online. The Charter4Change focal point therefore acted as a gatekeeper. She shared the research brief and urged those interested to get in touch to set up interviews. In effect, participants were obtained from a pre-defined sample (Charter4Change endorsers) and were selected using a combination of purposive and availability sampling.

All interviews were semi-structured. They were conducted online using Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype, based on participant preference. Interviews ranged from between 45-60 minutes, with the majority veering closer to one hour. All interviews were conducted with cameras turned on from the start. However, due to internet connectivity issues on the side of the participants, these were frequently turned off as the interviews progressed. All interviews stemmed from the same interview guide (see

Appendix 1), tailoring questions when needed. An additional interview was also conducted with two Charter4Change secretariat members, referred to as localisation key experts. All interviews were audio-recorded using Audacity software, for which consent was explicitly sought.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim, resulting in 164 pages and approximately 107,000 words (see separate Appendix). The data analysis was conducted using Nvivo software. Codes were developed using an inductive approach to ensure nuanced responses were captured. This approach broadly follows the grounded theory principles (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). Original codes were then re-coded into categories broadly aligned with the analytical framework structure (Appendix 4). The three countries were first analysed separately. Subsequently, patterns and differences were explored across the different contexts. This process informed the analysis presented in Chapters 5-9.

Interview participants

Almost all participant organisations were represented by their Executive Directors. It important to caveat that given the small number of participants per country, the findings cannot be generalised at the country-scale. However, many of the participants have strategic roles. This includes LNNGOs representatives in multi-stakeholder coordination bodies, the Chairs of NGO forums and representatives from localisation working groups. In effect, they have access to insights shared by many other humanitarian actors. The data obtained is therefore likely to represent perspectives beyond the 20 participants. Table 3 provides an overview of participant characteristics. However, in order to respect the anonymity of participants, the roles are not directly identifiable.

Table 3: LNNGO participant characteristics

	Ref.	Type of org.	Relevant information/scope[2]:	Strategic roles
South Sudan	SS1	National	Child protection; Gender-based violence	➢ Deputy chair of the NGO Forum ➢ National NGO representative in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) ➢ Advisory board rep: South Sudan Humanitarian Fund ➢ Country-Based Pooled Funds international working group ➢ Localisation Steering Committee representative ➢ Representative for National NGOs in Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
	SS2	National	Multi-sectoral: food security; WASH; protection; health; etc.	
	SS3	Local	Multi-sectoral in Nuba Mountains (conflict area)	
	SS4	Local	Conflict mitigation and peace building; food security; livelihoods; WASH; education	
	SS5	National	Food security and nutrition; livelihoods; protection	
	SS6	National	Women-led. Food security; livelihoods; protection (children and gender-based violence); WASH	

[2] Note: the distinction is made between 'natural hazards' (situated in coastal areas mainly) and 'Cox's Bazar' (refugee-related) for Bangladeshi participants to differentiate between the two humanitarian challenges.

	Ref.	Type of org.	Relevant information/scope[2]:	Strategic roles
	SS7	National	Gender-based violence; child protection; returning refugees; protection	➢ Grand Bargain Localisation Work stream rep.
Uganda	U1	National	CSO Civil-advocacy; humanitarian resource mobilisation	➢ Chair of the Charter4Change working group ➢ Representative from the Humanitarian Platform for Local and National Organisations in Uganda ➢ Chair of a local NGO platform ➢ Secretary general of a CSO network
	U2	Local	Community-based organisation Children and women's rights	
	U3	National	Faith-based (triple nexus approach: humanitarian, development and peacebuilding); refugee protection	
	U4	Local	Refugee-led Refugee protection (self-settled and in camps); conflict resolution and peace-building	
	U5	National	Disaster response and preparedness; nutrition; livelihoods; food-security	
	U6	National	Refugee-led Refugee protection; gender-based violence; child-protection; peacebuilding	
Bangladesh	B1	National	Natural hazards and Cox's Bazar Disaster response and preparedness	➢ National NGO representative in the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCCT) ➢ Chairperson of the National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors in Bangladesh ➢ Co-chair of Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum ➢ National NGO representative in the Strategic Executive Group of the Inter-Sectoral Coordination Group (ISCG) on Rohingya response
	B2	Local	Women-led; Natural hazards Emergency response	
	B3	Local	CSO; Cox's Bazar Refugee protection and response	
	B4	National	Natural hazards and Cox's Bazar Emergency response, refugee protection and response	
	B5	Local	Natural hazards Emergency response	
	B6	Local	Youth-led; Cox's Bazar and Natural hazards Emergency response	
	B7	National	Natural hazards and Cox's Bazar Multi-sectoral; education; health; disaster risk reduction; disaster management	

The local versus national typology is for illustrative purposes only, and should not be attributed to making assumptions about their identities. National does not mean nation-wide but is often the

distinction used when organisations operate in more than one locality. At other times it merely reflects their legal status. For example, most participants from South Sudan are legally registered as national NGOs. However, they often self-identify as local organisations, operating through a number of field offices. There are significant differences between participants in terms of experience, reputation and scale, but this is not determined by uniform labels. In effect, the all-encompassing term LLNGOs is used to represent the participants. The references provided will be used throughout the analysis to identify participants.

Online survey

An online survey was distributed specifically targeting Charter4Change INGO signatories, who have committed to reform in writing. This includes many of the major INGOs that have also signed the Grand Bargain Localisation commitments, such as Oxfam, ActionAid, Care, CAFOD, and Christian Aid. The survey sought to capture how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted humanitarian response, partnership structures and the impact on localisation according to INGOs.

The survey was programmed using SurveyPlanet (see Appendix 2). It comprised 14 questions and was designed to only take 6-8 minutes to incentivise response. However, respondents were also encouraged to voluntarily supplement their answers with a written comment. The Charter4Change focal point acted as a gatekeeper by disseminating the survey to all INGO signatories. Nine responses were obtained, from the larger sample of 38 INGOs. Although this was less than originally hoped for, the quality of the data is strong as most participants used the comment function. Furthermore, given the relatively small sample size, the intention was never to gather generalisable quantitative data. Respondents have been anonymised. However, of the five INGOs listed above, two responded to the survey. Four respondents also come from well-established large INGOs, most of which are faith-based. Two remained anonymous. Only one respondent is from an INGO not headquartered in the global north.

The data analysis was conducted in four steps. First each individual survey was reviewed, including particular attention to the written comments, which resulted in rich qualitative insights. Next, the results were compiled in Excel to organise the data using figures and graphs. Subsequently, each question was analysed in writing, taking note of both the responses and supplemented comments. Finally, the analysis was integrated with the interview data, to complement insight with a more systemic overview.

3.3.3 Secondary data: collection and analysis

Secondary sources

Grey literature obtained predominantly from reports has informed the baseline research into the country contexts (Chapter 4). Secondary sources have also been used to ascertain how Covid-19 has impacted systemic funding and the policy environment. After a review of available data online, the sources in Table 4 were selected, which constitute the most comprehensive accounts. The data analysis process comprised of reading the sources and taking notes of information deemed to be relevant for understanding systemic trends. The sources were analysed with due attention to who commissioned the reports and what implication this may have. Where relevant, this has been discussed in the analysis.

Table 4: Secondary sources

Source	Purpose
Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021	Provides an independent comprehensive overview of the humanitarian financing landscape, offering insights on Covid-19 induced trends.
Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 (GHRP)	This provides an overview on the policies and instruments put in place as a result of Covid-19. It is coordinated by IASC and OCHA, seen as two authoritative bodies within the formal humanitarian system. Both the policy and subsequent progress updates have been reviewed.
Global Humanitarian Policy Forum 2020	Hosted by UNOCHA, the forum brands itself as shaping the international humanitarian community's policy agenda. The 2020 output document was reviewed to analyse the impact of Covid-19.

Webinars

The Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW) is an annual event bringing together a multitude of humanitarian actors. Due to Covid-19, it was hosted online this year. 'Localisation and Humanitarian Coordination' was key priority area number one this year, evidencing its current relevance. Five of these webinar events were attended by the researcher, selected based on their ties to localisation and Covid-19. The list of events attended and panelists is provided in Appendix 3. This enabled an opportunity to gather insight into the donor perspective on how Covid-19 has impacted the humanitarian system. In terms of data analysis, notes were taken throughout the events. These notes were subsequently reviewed to identify relevant trends or differences. Recordings were also shared online, and could be reviewed retrospectively where necessary.

3.4 Reflection on reliability and validity of results

This section provides a brief reflection on the reliability and validity of the research data and results.

3.4.1 Positionality

As stated by Cunliffe (2004, p. 407) it is important to be critically reflexive by recognising the subjective understandings of reality, and how this impacts our assumptions. As a researcher, this is integral to not introduce undue bias into the design or analysis. The research topic is largely focused on local-international power dynamics and may be perceived as sensitive to some participants. As a researcher from Sweden based in the Netherlands, my international background might be associated as the antithesis to local by interview participants. The removal from their contexts is heightened by the desk-based nature of my research. Whilst interviewing the local organisations, it was therefore important to emphasise my intention to understand their perceptions and experiences. For example, rather than impose a definition of 'localisation' or preconceived notion of power dynamics, this was acquired through the research participants. However, there is a risk that my positionality still impacts my interpretation of the results. To counter this, I have aimed to transparently present the data supporting the analysis.

Cultural sensitivity has been another important consideration. As a researcher, it was important for me to not ask leading questions or make any assumptions about the unique country contexts. Instead, I endeavoured to establish rapport with each participant in order to obtain these insights and learn about their experiences. Many participants expressed gratitude for me wanting to listen to 'local' voices and offering an opportunity to share local perspectives to an international audience. Consequently, there is a risk that participants may have introduced a bias by overly representing their strengths. To counter this, I made sure to adhere to the interview guide to obtain sufficient insights on all relevant research areas. With that said, the main impact is that I obtained peripheral data on topics not directly related to my research, as opposed to compromising the quality of the data.

3.4.2 Biases and omissions

Generalised typology

Gibbons et al (2019, p.499) highlight the concern around identifying who legitimately represents local interests. It must therefore be recognised that LNNGO interests may vary within countries, and may not represent the interests of LNNGOs that are not Charter4Change endorsers. The research aims to be transparent in this regard. Similarly, the somewhat reductionist term 'international actors' is at times used in the analysis. The research aims to make distinctions insofar as possible. However, it also reflects the wording and perceptions used by participants.

Survey data

Two limitations are relevant in regards to the survey data. Firstly, the respondents are biased to INGOs who are supportive of the localisation agenda, given their commitment to the Charter4Change. Furthermore, the INGOs most interested in localisation are most likely to have responded.

Consequently, the survey findings cannot be generalised beyond the nine participants. Secondly, a limitation relates to lack of focus-country representation. The C4C focal point disseminated the survey to the INGO signatory contacts which are based in INGO HQs. She encouraged them to forward it to their country offices, but it is unlikely they did as only HQ respondents were obtained. A second dissemination channel was explored to address this limitation, by aiming to target INGO country offices in the three focus countries. However, only some had websites and the survey could only be shared via the 'General Enquiries' emails as there were no direct focal points. Unsurprisingly, no responses were therefore obtained. Consequently, no INGO Country Office perspectives from the focus countries have been obtained. This means LNNGO insights are complemented by systemic views, rather than by potential partner organisations also based in-country.

Representation

Finally, the research would have been strengthened by speaking to more actors operating in the three humanitarian country ecosystems. This pertains to UN-agency staff based in country, Red Cross and Red Crescent, and donors. Despite this, the research has succeeded in presenting the views of the primary research subjects, namely the LNNGOs.

4. Contextual background

The aim of this chapter is to give the reader sufficient contextual background of two key (albeit very different) areas. First, it presents an overview of current discussions on how Covid-19 may impact humanitarianism. Secondly, it sets out the humanitarian contexts in each country.

4.1 Setting the Covid-19 context

Academic writing on the influence of Covid-19 on the humanitarian landscape is limited to date. However, there is momentum amongst many humanitarian practitioners and policy researchers that this may signify a shift towards a 'humanitarian rethink' where the nature of relationships is fundamentally changed (Barbalet et al., 2020; CGD, 2020; Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2020; Spencer, 2020). At the relatively early days of the pandemic in April 2020, Schenkenberg van Mierop (2020) predicted that Covid-19 would, and should, accelerate the localisation agenda. Similarly, Konyndryk and Saez (2020) from the Center for Global Development (CGDEV) released a briefing arguing that the humanitarian system should rethink its business model in the face of COVID-19. They argued the notion of access and operational restrictions look different, whereby traditional humanitarian actors will be forced toward more equitable and deeper partnerships with local and host governments. The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute have framed Covid-19 as an opportunity for the humanitarian system to embrace their Grand Bargain commitments towards enabling local humanitarian action and raise the question whether "Covid-19 is the disruptor the humanitarian system needs" (Spencer, 2020, n.p).

Leveraging a less optimistic outlook, Konyndryk and Saez (2020) warned that the humanitarian financing model is unfit to respond to the pandemic, due to earmarking practices and lack of flexibility. This criticism is not new, as reflected in the Grand Bargain. Similarly, Barbalet et al. (2020) argue that Covid-19 is highlighting the failure of the humanitarian system to reform as per the localisation agenda. However, they also assert that "the pandemic could usher in more local forms of humanitarian action, and greater complementarity between local and international actors" (Barbalet et al., 2020, p.1). Oxfam International's former director of strategy, Barney Tallack's (2020) report in July 2020 contended that it was too early to forecast the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on the largest northern INGOs with certainty. However, he predicted that the existing sustainability issues facing the INGOs in terms of their relevance would be accelerated. Finally, Development Initiatives (2020) warn that the aid landscape, both humanitarian and developmental is changing. Traditional bilateral donors are experiencing recessions and in effect facing significant cuts to aid budget (Development Initiatives, 2020). Some speculate this may increase competition for resources rather than shift existing power structures (Barbalet et al., 2020, p.5).

4.2 Country contexts: humanitarian ecosystems

This section aims to identify the nature of humanitarian challenges faced in each focus country, alongside the ecosystems of relevant actors and institutional structures.

4.2.1 Uganda

Uganda hosts a protracted refugee situation, in part due to the generous open-door policy for refugees maintained by the Government of Uganda (UNHCR, 2019). Bidi Bidi refugee settlement has the largest refugee population in Africa. Ongoing influxes, predominantly from South Sudan, DRC and Burundi, also means this is growing (ACAPS, 2021c). In addition, food insecurity and malnutrition are rife across the country, resulting in increased risk of humanitarian crises (ACAPS, 2021c; WFP, 2021). The country is also vulnerable to natural hazards, especially droughts and floods. Building resilience to respond to these hazards has been identified as a priority to mitigate the effects; at household, communal, district and national levels (Oxfam, 2016, p.10). In 2020, Uganda faced a 'triple crises' of locusts, floods and the pandemic (Charter4Change, 2020).

The Government of Uganda, through the Office of the Prime Minister's (OPM) Department for Refugees and Disasters is the primary actor in coordinating humanitarian response (Oxfam, 2016, p.11). The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is a multi-stakeholder coordination body geared towards both humanitarian and developmental needs of refugees and host communities (OPM, 2017). Its steering group is predominantly composed of government ministry representatives (about 57%). It also includes one representative from various non-governmental bodies, such as UNHCR, the UN Resident Coordinator, INGO, the private sector and an LNNGO nominated by the National NGO Forum (OPM, 2017). In recent years there has been an increased emphasis towards country-ownership of humanitarian preparedness and response (Oxfam, 2016, p.14). District and local government committees on disaster management (DDMC) are responsible for coordinating response at local level. However, the quality of delivering this responsibility is subject to discussion (Oxfam, 2016, p.14). INGOs and LNNGOs alike are active in the humanitarian ecosystem. NGOs are typically both humanitarian and development oriented. This intersection is central to the humanitarian operating context in Uganda. For example, Uganda's SDG Secretariat, managed by the Office of the Prime Minister has embedded 'localisation' in their development strategy to "fast track Uganda's Commitment to the 2030 Agenda" (Office of the Prime Minister, n.d). The strategy promotes local government ownership of service delivery and inclusion of local communities within its institutional framework. However, significant progress is required to operationalise this ambition (OPM, n.d.).

4.2.2 Bangladesh

Bangladesh faces two distinct humanitarian challenges. Firstly, it is one of the worlds' most vulnerable countries to natural disasters; experiencing cyclones, droughts, flooding, earth-quakes and climate-change vulnerability (NAHAB, 2020). More than 80 percent of its population are at risk to exposure, especially those living in coastal areas. Roughly one quarter of its land mass becomes overrun with

flood water each year (GBLW, 2018, p.9). Secondly, Bangladesh faces a protracted refugee crisis. An estimated 870,000 Rohingya refugees live in Cox's Bazar District, across 34 camps (ACAPS, 2021a). This includes Kutupalong which is the largest and most densely populated refugee camp in the world. The situation represents significant humanitarian challenges both for the refugees themselves and the host communities (ACAPS, 2021a). Despite its protracted humanitarian crises, Bangladesh reached lower-middle-income status in 2015. Pre-Covid it was on track to become middle-income leave the UN's Least Developed Country list by 2026 (World Bank, 2021). In addition to Covid-19, Bangladesh experienced the 'super cyclone' Amphan in May 2020 and a fire in Cox's Bazar in March 2021.

The Government of Bangladesh plays a leading role in planning, delivery and coordination of efforts related to prevention, preparedness and response (GBLW, 2018, p.9). It has extensively invested in disaster risk management due to the country's protracted exposure and vulnerability to natural hazards, managed through national, regional and local authorities (GBLW, 2018; NAHAB, 2020). The government also leads the Rohingya response through the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission. However, international actors are also very integrated into these coordination structures. For example, coordination of response to natural disasters often leverages the Humanitarian Coordination Country Team (HCCT) (GBLW, 2018, p.11). It is co-chaired by the UN Resident Coordinator and the Secretary of Disaster Management, and liaises with relevant local authorities using thematic clusters. Similarly, UNHCR and IOM co-chair the Inter Sectoral Coordination Group (ISCG) for Rohingya response (GBLW, 2018, p.11). The point here being that the multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms are dominated by international actors. However, advocacy from LNNGOs has resulted in increased representation (GLBW, 2018, p.1).

International NGOs have had a presence in Bangladesh for many years. However, they predominantly implement programs through local partners as opposed to having a field presence (GBLW, 2018, p.12). Despite the fact LNNGOs are the primary responders, they only obtain a small amount of aid directly from donors. Instead, most funding is obtained through international actors (NAHAB, 2020, p.62). Local and national NGO forums compose a central aspect of the humanitarian response ecosystem (NAHAB, 2020). They are frequently leveraged to hold the wider international humanitarian community to account regarding the formal localisation commitments made through the Grand Bargain (COAST, 2017).

4.2.3 South Sudan

The Republic of South Sudan is the youngest sovereign state in the world after achieving independence in 2011 (ACAPS, 2020). It is also one of the poorest. South Sudan has experienced intermittent civil war since December 2013 (OCHA, 2020). Its humanitarian climate is characterised by large-scale internal displacement, refugee outflow, food insecurity and widespread violence and insecurity (OCHA, 2020). The situation is further exacerbated by seasonal flooding between June to September (ACAPs, 2020, p.7). The protracted conflict has prevented South Sudan from developing adequate infrastructure

or basic services. For example, health services are weak, the limited road network presents access constraints and information communication technology is limited. The internet penetration rate is estimated at 12% and the mobile network only covers 20% of the country (ACAPS, 2020, p.7). According to the Fragile States Index (2021), South Sudan ranked third in 2020; and has consistently ranked in the top three since the civil war. In February 2020, the Transitional Government of National Unity was formed. It culminated from the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ACAPS, 2021b). South Sudan experienced reduced conflict between the government and opposition in 2020. Despite this, there was a surge in inter-communal violence and conflicts, predominantly over resources and land, resulting in continued displacement and casualties (ACAPS, 2021b).

ACAPS (2020, p.7) estimate that 7.5 million of the 11.7 million population are in need of humanitarian assistance. Governance has been weak or absent for several years, stemming from and reinforcing a vulnerable socio-political climate (ACAPS, 2020, p.8). Consequently, the coordination of response to the multi-dimensional humanitarian crisis has historically been managed by the UN-led South Sudan Humanitarian Coordination Team (HCT) (Protection Cluster, 2020). In practice, coordination operates via a 'Cluster System' at national and sub-national level. Each cluster represents a specific thematic are of work, such as child protection or gender-based violence. Membership of LNNGOs in the clusters exceeds 50% (L2GP, 2020, p.1). However less than 10% of the leadership positions at national level are occupied in LNNGO, and less than 15% at sub-national level (L2GP, 2020, p.1). In effect, humanitarian coordination is overwhelmingly led by UN agencies and supported by INGOs (L2GP, 2020). International organisations typically rely on LNNGOs to implement response on the ground due to access constraints and high-risk associated with the conflict (Moro et al., 2020, p.5). However, due to the political fragility, the operating environment is also characterised by exacerbated suspicions that LNNGOs may be political affiliates, which risks clashing with the humanitarian principles of neutrality.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP, 2020) is an independent research institute, specialising in research into the humanitarian economy. In November 2020, they published a research brief focusing on what funding flows currently looks like in South Sudan. The UN administered Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) called the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) is a key source of funding for LNNGOs in South Sudan. According to UNOCHA data, in 2019, 38% of the funding via the CBPF was allocated to LNNGOs (L2GP, 2020). Although this appears to reach the 25% Grand Bargain target, in reality, it only reflects 2.5% of total humanitarian funding flowing into South Sudan, illustrating that the funding reaching the CBPF is modest (L2GP, 2020, p.1). Most funding for LNNGOs is therefore obtained via intermediaries, typically UN organisations and INGOs, making local actors dependent on the international counterparts (L2GO, 2020).

Scratching the surface…

These contextual accounts of humanitarian challenges and institutional operating environments are necessary to enable a baseline for conducting the political economy analysis. However, they have only scratched the surface of what humanitarian response actually looks like in-country. The next chapters leverage the experiences and perspectives from LNNGOs on the ground to present the findings and analysis of the research.

5. Agency and Power in Pre-Covid Ecosystems

As a starting point for studying change, one must first obtain a comprehensive understanding of the initial context. This chapter therefore aims to provide an overview of how LNNGOs experienced their relational power dynamics prior to Covid-19 using primary data collected via the interviews. The chapter concludes by identifying the key expressions of power imbalances that need to be further explored in the new Covid-context.

5.1 Mapping the relational agency of LNNGOs

The agency and roles of LNNGOs are to a large extent the product of interactions with other humanitarian actors. Three types of relationships are used to map out the relational agency of LNNGOs. Firstly, the coordination and collaboration with the wider humanitarian ecosystem in-country to establish the significance of all actors. Second, the relationships amongst LNNGOs to determine their collective agency. Finally, the relationships with international partners, which is the source of most power contentions. In doing so, this section illustrates how LNNGOs operate within the institutional humanitarian contexts described in Chapter 4. It also takes stock of perspectives on the localisation agenda pre-Covid. This is relevant indicator for relational dynamics and shifts the theoretical and contested 'localisation' debate to a practical from-the-ground perspective.

5.1.1 Uganda

Ugandan LNNGOs typically feel well integrated in the wider ecosystem. According to U3, *"humanitarian coordination in Uganda is one of the best"* because *"we are working under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework where all actors, including NGOs, UN and local partners are always involved in meetings."* In addition, LNNGOs are integrated well into Interagency Sectoral Working Groups, which merges work across the humanitarian-development nexus across. The Government is positively regarded as *"very supportive to local actors" (U4).* They enable access to operate on the ground and promote the representation of LNNGOs in all working groups, thus constitute an ally.

LNNGOs also engage amongst themselves through local networks, both formal and informal. One participant spoke of the virtue of access to *"local Council, the local leaders, cultural leaders, religious leaders"* through *"structures always on the ground" (U3)*. This evidences the strategic positioning of LNNGOs in relation to local authorities, but also more informal humanitarian gatekeeper actors. Positive experiences of collaboration and lesson-sharing were highlighted by the Chair of the Acholi (northern Uganda) Platform for Local and National Humanitarian Actors, and a representative from the West Nile Humanitarian Platform. Both platforms are geared towards networking, advocacy, partnership and even resource-sharing amongst LNNGOs. However, they also promote engagement with INGOs to identify *"how best to cooperate and work together as partners" (U2).* This highlights the collaborative environment amongst LNNGOs in Uganda.

The biggest area of contention for Ugandan LNNGOs stems from partnerships with international actors, predominantly INGOs. The most pressing issues are twofold. Firstly, all participants highlighted that they are treated as "*sub-contractors"* rather than "*equitable partners"*. 'Sub-contracting' is a term used to describe relationship dynamics whereby LNNGOs are designated the role as implementers of response activities that have been designed by international partners. As explained, LNNGOs:

> *"…do not participate at the decision-making tables. We had limited space as actors. And those are some of the things that we challenge" (U5)*

All participants explained this occurs because funds are given directly to INGOs by donors based on pre-agreed contracts, often designed at head-quarter level. All LNNGOs echoed the same issue: *"we as local actors based within the community of course have a better understanding… of our context or the refugee settlements where we are operating"* (U4). However, this contextual knowledge is overlooked, thus compromising the quality of interventions and marginalising LNNGOs. Subsequently, the reliance on intermediaries gives rise to an unsustainable dependency culture.

Secondly, many participants also raised international actors frequently perceive local actors as competitors for funding rather than partners. This translates to implementation of projects directly without the use of local partners. In contrast to the sub-contracting issue, U5 explained that LNNGOs may provide information feeding into project design, but that *"once they [international actors] arrive, you're swept aside, then they swing into action… and your role stops there"*. U2 stated that implementation without local partners applies to *"almost 95%"* of INGOs. Although the number cannot be verified and is likely exaggerated, it paints the clear picture that LNNGOs feel international actors should be better at leveraging collaborative partnerships. Although LNNGOs shared examples of good partnership practices from specific INGOs; more generally there is a desire to restructure mainstream partnership roles so LNNGOs can lead response complemented by international support and not vice versa. Inequitable partnership dynamics is therefore identified as the main inhibitor of LNNGOs agency, and why *"the practicality of localisation in Uganda is not yet visible" (U2).*

In Uganda, 'localisation' is regarded as *"bringing local and national actors at the forefront" (U1)*. They emphasise LNNGOs are best placed for *"providing accountability to the people affected by crisis" (U5).* Onus is placed on international actors to facilitate this by honouring their Grand Bargain commitments to strengthen support and funding to LNNGOs. To this effect, the Charter4Change Working Group was identified as a positive vehicle for mobilising localisation progress and advocacy pre-Covid. This constitutes an alliance of 51 LNNGOs and 15 INGOs, and led by elected LNNGO representatives (C4C Working Group Uganda, 2020). LNNGOs appreciate the *"opportunity to take the leadership at the C4C Working Group" (U5)*. The relevance is amplified given the prominence of the large INGOs that are part of the group, illustrating unified support for more locally-driven response in Uganda. Albeit, adherence to commitments in practice was seen as inconsistent. Finally, it illustrates

that LNNGOs in Uganda had a strong advocacy foundation for more power to LNNGOs in the pre-Covid context.

5.1.2 Bangladesh

Government authorities are perceived as the primary leader of humanitarian response by all participants, and an instrumental ally. They are deemed facilitators of response for LNNGOs by granting approval for operations, but participants also alluded to 'bureaucratic' issues posing some challenges to their operations. Working efficiently with the Government at national, district and local level is therefore seen as a strategic focus area according to the Chair of the National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors in Bangladesh (NAHAB). No participants spoke of wanting stronger representation within the internationally-dominated coordination bodies such as the HCCT. They mainly regard this as an information-sharing body, but not as authoritative.

Instead, emphasis is on prioritising local and national coordination mechanisms, such as Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum (CCNF) or NAHAB. The forums strengthen collective agency to facilitate locally-led response and emphasise the *"need to be more bottom-up" (B5).* The internationally-led humanitarian system is seen as posing systemic issues, which local structures do not. Describing this, B1 articulated that there is a divide whereby LNNGOs "*are accountable to the affected population first, then the Government, then the donors. And this is lacking in the international community".* In other words, the top-down incentive structures in the traditional model are deemed misguided. Notwithstanding, LNNGOS *"welcome the international support"* (B7), but emphasise complementarity. This stems from recognition that the scale of certain crises requires the *'professional management and systems' (B1)* of larger international actors, such as the Rohingya crisis. The onus is therefore on international actors aligning to local structures, as opposed to absorbing local into internationally-driven mechanisms. Civil society are also seen as part and parcel of humanitarian response. This informal type of local humanitarian action is *"called the 'Whole of Society Approach' [and] includes all sorts of social capital" (B1),* usually in voluntary capacity in response to flooding or other natural hazards. LNNGOs play a central role in promoting and facilitating these initiatives.

This is relevant for understanding why participants frequently expressed a sense of antagonism towards the dominant presence of international humanitarian actors. As explained by B2 *"all the LNNGOs, we are basically depending on the INGOs! So, there is a pattern… they are basically undermining the local and national capacity".* This marginalisation spills over on wider civil society structures, whereby *"dependence on expatriates" (B1)* is at odds with Bangladesh's ambitions as a developing country, thus impacting its wider political economy. The experience of feeling subordinated manifests through the sub-contracting and funding dependency issues previously evidenced in the Ugandan context. Inequitable partnership dynamics are deemed to blame. B3 stated:

"We always tell them [INGOs] let us sit in the driving seat of the car; you just sit behind the car. Let's see how we drive a bit! But they are not allowing this…"

Instead INGOs and UN agencies *"are developing the projects by themselves"*, and treat *"local organisations as a subcontractor" (B2)* or *"like a delivery channel" (B4)* rather than as *"real partners"*. Most participants highlighted how this compromises the quality of response, as international actors are framed as *"outsiders"* that *"don't understand the culture"* (B3). LNNGOs perceive the inequitable dynamics as maintained due to a harmful capacity narrative which frames INGOs as more capable. Consequently, donors route funds to INGOs first, rather than directly to LNNGOs, who then compete amongst themselves for access to the funding via intermediaries. This is also seen as an inefficient and costly use of sparse humanitarian funding. B2 explained, *"each and every operation is implemented by the local NGOs [but] everything is lower [funding] than the INGOs!"*. The main factor compromising the agency of LNNGOs is thus seen the dependency on intermediaries.

Several participants spoke about the Grand Bargain localisation agenda. B1 stated *"discourses like the Grand Bargain… everything is 'their' commitment"* which gives rise to an attitude of *"aid colonialism"* due to the inherently unequal relationships. Similarly, B3 referred to the capacity building aspect of the Grand Bargain as a *"colonial mindset"*. Reflecting on the lack of adherence to commitments, B4 declared:

"Honestly, I can say I talked to the many international organisations... they think if localisation happened, they will lose their job, or they will lose their leadership, they will lose their control."

Although all participants spoke about the importance of localisation, its meaning in the Bangladeshi context has been adapted from the prescribed agenda. Speaking on behalf of NAHAB, the Chairman[3] stated *"to us, localisation is the local management of humanitarian actions…relating to allocating resources and response" (B7)*. This was echoed by most participants, adding that it requires *"recognition of local actors" (B4)* and *"respecting the LNNGO's capacity" (B1)* by international actors, especially INGOs. In contrast to Uganda, the 'localisation pathway' for structural shift of power to LNNGOs is not as closely tied to the formal reform agenda. B1 explicitly stated that localisation is *"not all about the international organisations"* but rather for but also requires *"government institutions to function properly"*.

Notably, the pre-Covid context entailed active localisation advocacy collectively led by LNNGO forums, such as NAHAB and CCNF. The advocacy was geared towards seeking "*complementary roles and equitable partnerships with international actors" (B7)* whilst respecting local structures and the coordination of response in-country. Furthermore, the NAHAB Chairman stressed the importance of

[3] Waived anonymity

treating humanitarian action as integrated in the development nexus to promote sustainability and counter dependency.

5.1.3 South Sudan

Due to South Sudan's prolonged status as a fragile state*, "all necessary services do not come from the government but through the humanitarian setting" (SS6)*. In contrast to the other countries, UNOCHA and other UN-agencies are regarded as the leaders of humanitarian response rather than the government. All participants recognise the instrumental role played by international humanitarian actors. Their presence is promoted, but the nature of the relational dominance is framed as problematic. SS2 reflected on the role of the Government, stating LNNGOs think it should:

> *"Pressure the internationals and the UN agencies to work closely with the local actors in the country. But that doesn't happen because the Government doesn't have the structures because of the conflict." (SS2)*

Furthermore, although Government representatives are co-leads within the humanitarian coordination clusters, SS1 stated that in reality *"their presence and representation in low"* during the meetings. They conclude that the *"Government see themselves as passive listeners but no active voice in the clusters"* (SS1). All clusters, except one, are internationally-led. Lack of representation in the HCT is thus seen as a significant issue, as it culminates in a humanitarian ecosystem driven exclusively by multilateral institutions. Participants highlighted the imbalance whereby each UN agency is entitled to one representative within the coordination mechanisms (referring to the HCT and Clusters at both national and district level). However, LNNGOs and INGOs can only send one representative each. SS6 made the point: *"It's quite absurd…we do not have that space! It is usually more of UN agencies sitting on that table. And most times, yes, they do support their own, you know?"* LNNGOs therefore become further marginalised in the operating space. Finally, the NGO forum was identified as a useful information-sharing and coordination tool but without decision-making authority.

The international dominance manifests differently in South Sudan compared to the other countries. Bangladeshi and Ugandan LNNGOs experience power imbalances through inequitable partnerships and systemic funding structures. However, they also have alternative routes to engage in local humanitarian action within their ecosystems through local networks and government authorities. These options are not as established nor readily available in South Sudan. In fact, no participants referred to the virtue of LNNGO networks, suggesting that collective agency is lacking.

All participants identified lack of access to direct funding as the key issue for LNNGOs. As stated in Chapter 4, the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) is a key source of funding for LNNGOs. By design, pooled funding mechanisms do not require intermediary layers, thus are praised in the Grand Bargain policy realm as a tool to channel direct funding from donors to LNNGOs. Although this is true in theory, insights gathered from the interviews paint a sobering picture regarding how this plays out in

practice. Participants unanimously regard the SSHF as an instrumental but inequitable tool. They spoke of the unfair approval processes that LNNGOs are subjected to. For example, SS1 explained that criteria include the involvement in multi-sectoral response. This is biased against the very nature of LNNGOs which often specifically focus on one area and are limited in ability to scale this up. Furthermore, the few LNNGOs that have been approved are then subject to competition with INGOs and UN agencies before being able to access any funding. SS2 used a metaphor to explain the situation:

> *"It's like a mother cooks and has three kids; she gives two plates full and puts at the end of their beds. And the only plate that remains for the only other person, they come and divide it, while they have their own different plates in their rooms!"*

Therefore, although the SSHF is the only viable tool for direct funding, the reality is a competitive environment with actors who already have access to alternative funding streams. Consequently, the majority of LNNGOs rely on 'fundermediaries', namely the UN agencies and INGOs. The language used by SS2 illustrates the poor quality of the funds: "*they give a little amount that they know will sustain the desperate national NGOs for a few months".* As in the other countries sub-contracting through inequitable partnerships therefore becomes the norm.

South Sudanese LNNGOs associate localisation to structural funding changes. They spoke of *"increase funding to local organisation" (SS5)* and *"removing the intermediary layer" (SS4)* in order to *"put national actors at the forefront of every intervention"* (SS6) and complementing this with international partner support. In effect, it is closely tied to the Grand Bargain commitments. Reflecting on its infancy, SS7 said *"local partners thinking that this is an opportunity that is coming to change the narrative!"* However, they proceeded to state "*four years down the line… [international] partners cannot even tell you how many local partners they have reached",* resulting in *"missing the whole point".* The 'localisation' progress pre-Covid was not represented by collaborative advocacy (like C4C in Uganda) nor local networks (both Bangladesh and Uganda). Instead, it lacked a coordinated pathway for systemic change. For example, SS5 emphasised the need for leadership:

> *"We will hear 'localisation localisation localisation'… but there is no meeting at the country level to talk about localisation… how people can [we] move to bring people together with international NGO, or to bring national NGOs together to discuss localisation? It's not there! So, there is no lead organisation really…"*

In practice, there is a Localisation Working Group in South Sudan. Speaking to its LNNGO representative, they contended *"localisation remains on paper… we are still doing the talk instead of walking"*. Therefore, it may be unsurprising that some participants were unaware of its existence.

5.2 Expressions of power imbalances

As illustrated, relationship dynamics between humanitarian actors contributes significantly to shaping the agency of LNNGOs. The different contextual and structural environments have also given rise to different manifestations of power struggles and potential pathways for change. Nevertheless, despite the differences, the sources of the described struggles are consistent. This section aims to evidence this point through two key expressions of power imbalances between international and local actors; namely a harmful capacity discourse and unequitable access to funding.

5.2.1 Capacity discourse shaping agential roles and relationships

Discourse surrounding LNNGOs capacity informs how other actors interact with them, and what opportunities they are awarded within their operating structures. In other words, it shapes their roles and 'political identities' (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p.88). Most significantly, it legitimises and sustains the inequitable sub-contracting partnership models described in Section 5.1. All 20 LNNGOs identified the dominant capacity discourse as a grossly biased, resulting in harming the agency of LNNGOs by imposing restraints on their autonomy to operate. They described the capacity narrative as exclusively framed around humanitarian actors' ability to manage large-scale funds in line with donor-imposed compliance criteria. Consequently, the most important factor determining capacity is the strength of financial and risk management systems. At a systemic scale, international actors are stronger on this front. LNNGOs do not dispute this nor dispel the importance of strengthening their systems.

Problematically however, other forms of capacity such as contextual knowledge and proximity to vulnerable localities is ignored. As stated by B1, the current ideas have shaped incentives that prioritise *"accounts-ability"* to donors, rather than *"accountability"* to vulnerable localities. The resulting perception is also that LNNGOs are deemed to entirely lack capacity. Participants therefore challenged the reductionist framing of capacity by highlighting their comparative advantages to international partners.

> *"For me, I look at that as a perception, not a reality, because how do you define capacity? First of all, you [international partners] said the local actors don't have capacity. What do you mean?... We, who are the frontline, who are the first responders can actually do it better, and do it faster to save to save lives!" (U5)*

This 'perception' is regarded as a manifestation of inequitable power. As stated by B3:

> *"Capacity building is a colonial mindset… international actors claim that they need to build the capacity of LNNGOs whilst disregarding the wealth of capacity that exists in the form of contextual knowledge, field presence, proximity to communities and understanding of their needs."*

Capacity-building discourse implies that LNNGOs are subordinates to international actors that impart the capacity. However, as evidenced in 5.1, international partners rely on LNNGOs contextual knowledge and access to communities to operate. Lack of recognition of LNNGO capacity was unanimously identified as a factor sustaining unequitable partnerships. Several participants therefore promoted the need to shift the narrative to "capacity-sharing" or "capacity-strengthening" to better reflect the real dynamics.

Participants across all countries also described "*mistrust"* and *"stereotypes about local actors"* relating to mismanagement of funding or ability to uphold humanitarian principles. This results in the perception that LNNGOs cannot be trusted to be the primary recipients of donor funds and require oversight by international partners to capably deliver response. International actors are seen as fueling this narrative. For example, SS1 spoke of resulting *"exploitation"* as *"INGOs, they convince the big donors that you don't need to give the national NGO direct funding, because their capacity is not adequate."* The spillover effect results in barriers to accessing donors, and to establishing partnerships in the first place.

5.2.2 Inequitable access to resources

Humanitarian financing is complex, constituting multiple channels. This research focuses mainly on the 'traditional' aid funding originating from bilateral donors, as this constitutes the largest portion of humanitarian systemic funding. The second key expression of power imbalance manifests through inequitable access to these resources. As evidenced across all country contexts, the primary funding channel is through international intermediaries; granting them the befitting title 'fundermediaries'. This reliance is identified as sustaining the sub-contracting dynamics. It compromises both the quantity and quality of funding. Explaining this:

> *"... [international partners] only allocate resources for their project intervention, but there is almost zero contribution to the organisation, means they are not helping local organisation to develop their capacity." (B4)*

International partners are equipped with technology and management systems that LNNGOs do not have. However, they typically do not award them funds to develop these either, thus perpetuating the capacity discourse by further engraining the imbalances. In practice, this suggests international partners are disregarding the localisation commitments to strengthen the capacity (financial and technical) of local partners, as stipulated in the Grand Bargain. In attempting to explain this, participants expressed concern that international actors view LNNGOs as competitors. Resultingly, there is an assumption that if LNNGOs achieved autonomy, it would threaten their roles. Participants unanimously highlight the need to obtain more equitable access to direct funding from bilateral donors. The current climate is too competitive, and rewards actors with 'stronger' capacity, evidencing the integrated nature of the power imbalances.

To summarise, the perceptions LNNGOs have of their relational dynamics and structural contexts matter. It affords insight into their struggles for power and desired changes. This chapter has identified the harmful capacity discourse and inequitable access to funding as the key sources of power imbalance. They compromise the agency of LNNGOs and generate a dependency on international humanitarian actors. In effect, they comprise the analytical focal points for exploring whether Covid-19 has changed power dynamics (Chapters 7 and 8), compared to the baseline established in 5.1.

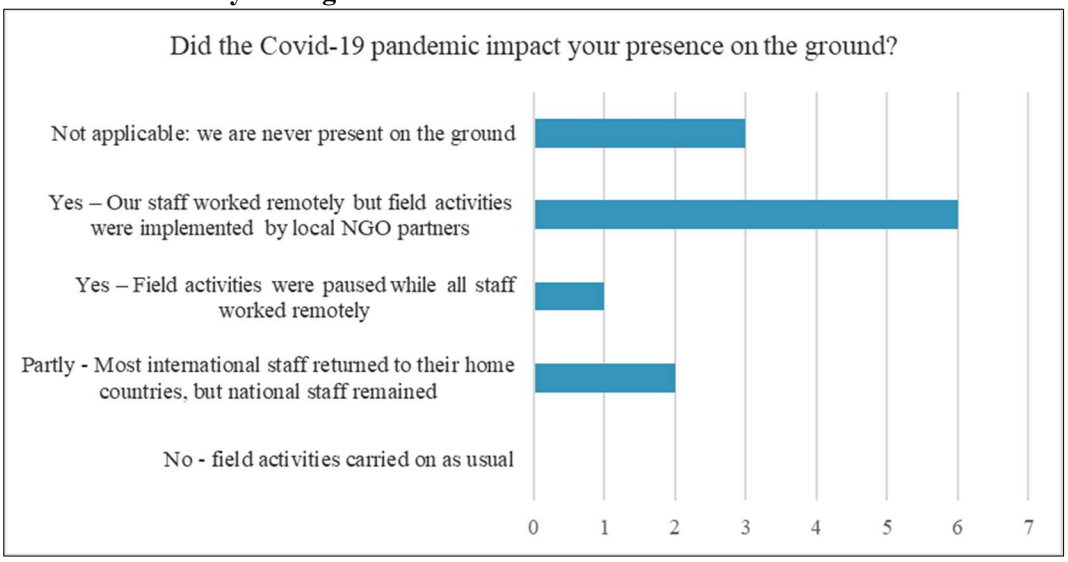
6. The Covid-19 context

The political economy analysis employed recognises structure as a medium for agency and vice versa. Furthermore, it sees structure both as the context and as an outcome (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014). The first step for exploring whether Covid-19 has affected the distribution of power therefore entails understanding the novel operating context. To this effect, this chapter aims to analyse how Covid-19 has impacted the mobilisation of humanitarian response on the ground. First, it identifies the wider systemic trends based on both primary and secondary data sources. Subsequently, the chapter explores the institutional and structural changes enforced in the focus countries, based on the experiences and perspectives of LNNGOs.

6.1 Systemic mobility trends

Covid-19 has inflicted an unprecedented shock to the entire humanitarian system, challenging existing operating structures. Multi-stakeholder discussions at the HNPW webinars repeatedly emphasised two key impacts on mobility. Firstly, international travel restrictions resulted in broken supply chains, altering the typical business model which relies on extensive mobilisation of international man-power. This gave rise to an increased reliance on LNNGOs, both for responding to the impacts of Covid-19 and existing humanitarian crises. This was also highlighted in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 (2020;2021). Secondly, the composition of international organisations already based in-country were affected. There was some variation between organisational policies and practices. However, in general, international staff were repatriated whilst local staff worked remotely. Again, this resulted in increased reliance on LNNGO partners to implement response on the ground. This is not merely based on anecdotal evidence from the webinars and interviews, but confirmed by INGO survey respondents, as illustrated in figure 3.

Figure 3: INGO mobility during Covid-19



The pandemic impacted the mobility of all INGOs. Some responded with more than one option to reflect different country contexts. Disaggregated findings clearly indicate that all INGOs with field presence implemented response through LNNGO partners. Respondent 1 supplemented their response with the comment:

> *"... the few international staff we have did need to fly home. In general, the local staff has been working from home during the pandemic while the local partners have done their best to continue working in the field to their best ability."*

This mirrors the experiences shared by interviews participants. Although the primary responders on the ground are normally LNNGOs, this polarisation of roles became near absolute during Covid-19.

6.2 Navigating the novel context

All participants emphasised that Covid-19 significantly altered humanitarian response. This section aims to illustrate what the LNNGO operating context looked like from the ground perspective, and how novel institutional barriers were navigated. It should be caveated that at the time of the research, the Covid-19 context was still evolving. Therefore, the findings primarily reflect LNNGO experiences during the initial months of the outbreak.

6.2.1 Gatekeepers and restrictions

Mobilisation hinges on access; the ability for humanitarian actors to reach vulnerable populations, which is subject to approval by gatekeepers. In the context of Covid-19, the primary gatekeepers set the novel institutional rules for operation. In Uganda, Covid-19 coordination fell under the remit of the President's office. Similarly, in Bangladesh the Ministry of Health was seen as the central authority leading response. In South Sudan however, the authority of the government was not as clear. Three participants raised that Covid-19 response coordination posed a significant challenge to the transitional government. SS6 detailed that *"at the start of the pandemic, it was quite absurd in that the entire mechanism was mainly UN-led".* Directives to LNNGOs were issued via the government. However, SS6 highlighted that the *"weak Ministry of Health"* is *"just there in terms of name"* and entirely dependent on humanitarian multilaterals.

Inclusion of LNNGOs in national Covid-19 response plans largely reflected the pre-existing dynamics with governments. In Uganda, LNNGOs were invited to biweekly district-level update meetings. All humanitarian actors were urged to support the government with Covid-19 response. In recognition of the strategic positioning of LNNGOs, they were encouraged to cascade awareness-raising to community-level. For example, U5 detailed the value of liaising with community-leaders as gatekeepers to access wider communities. Similarly, many participants in Bangladesh emphasised that LNNGOs, often alongside local authorities, developed sensitisation and risk communication campaigns. In contrast, participants in South Sudan spoke of a *"division where the international actors are the ones at the forefront of the Covid-19 response space" (SS7),* acting as gatekeepers. LNNGOs therefore felt

excluded and actively tried *to "push for some space within the conversation" (SS7).* That notwithstanding, LNNGOs who gained access acted as the primary humanitarian responders on the ground, as opposed to international organisations who predominantly resorted to remote working.

National government-imposed restrictions also significantly impacted mobilisation of response. Participants across all countries identified lockdowns, new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and general movement restrictions as posing challenges. For example, the scale of operations had to be reduced due to social distancing SOPs, meaning less community members could be reached. As previously stated, LNNGOs leveraged local networks and community gatekeepers to adapt. Some were able to navigate the restrictions easier than others, depending on relationships with gatekeepers. For example, U5 highlighted how their status as a local organisation offered them a strategic advantage:

> *"It was easy for us… based on our experience, our closeness to the local government, we were also authorised and given the movement permit"*

Movement restrictions were felt the hardest in South Sudan. National NGOs often send staff and supplies to project locations, mirroring the international actor response model. Consequently, quarantine rules imposed on travel impaired the ability to maintain this. The immobility rendered some organisations unable to remain in the field. Others were able to adapt or leverage their field offices for response. In comparison, participants from Uganda and Bangladesh were typically permanently based in the communities they serve. Nonetheless, proximity to communities did not immediately equate to access. Illustrating the complexity faced by responders on the ground, B7 stated *"on the one hand, there was a movement restriction; on the other hand, there need to be response to the cyclone [Amphan] to help people!".* These more contextual insights are relevant for understanding the structural impact of Covid-19. It illustrates that although the systemic mobility trends identified in 6.1 increased reliance on LNNGOs, they were left to navigate a challenging context.

6.2.2 The protection paradox: exacerbated need and international retreat

As stated at the HNPW and evidenced in Figure 3, international organisations with field presence have typically chosen to keep their own staff working remotely, whilst continuing to leverage LNNGO partners for response on the ground. This illustrates how international organisation have therefore actively reconfigured their own access and response environment. During the interviews, a clear finding emerged; this novel actor ecosystem is perceived as a protection paradox. Participants often emphasised that Covid-19 increased the duty of care of all humanitarian agencies by exacerbating existing crises and the needs of vulnerable communities. Simultaneously, international organisations were unable to – or chose not to- honour the commitment to protect by retreating from the field. In contrast, LNNGOs emphasised their own commitment to protect, often at great personal risk.

This point was consistently made across all three contexts. For example, in South Sudan LNNGOs stated that UN agencies and INGOs *"ran away" (SS2)* when the pandemic was announced. and

"retreated" (SS6; SS7) by only working from home. SS7 added *"when I say the local remain on the ground, we have no choice!"* Similarly, Ugandan LNNGOs contended that international withdrawal meant local partners remaining on the ground needed to *"find ways to respond to the urgent needs" (U6)* whilst putting themselves at *"great risk for the sake of helping our communities" (U4).* In illustrating the stark contrast, U4 stated:

> *"Those that have the money left [international organisations] … That was the time that refugees needed it [support] the most, however it was the time that they left."*

In Bangladesh, several participants spoke of '*expats'* retuning to the capital or their home countries for *'security',* contrasted with lack of support for the increased risk LNNGOs exposed themselves to. In both Uganda and South Sudan, the withdrawal of international field presence left a significant gap. In South Sudan, the context presented a shock to their usual humanitarian business model of long-standing international presence whilst *"the country is struggling with famine, floods and all kinds of disasters" (SS6).* However, in Bangladesh participants did not experience a significant gap or shock to prior operating contexts surrounding the Rohingya-crisis and natural hazards.

6.2.3 Power and the push to 'localise' response

Mobilisation during Covid-19 is not merely a neutral product of its context, but also shaped by active political decisions by humanitarian actors. Governments represent the formal power of decision-making regarding restrictions and granting operational access. However, international policy-makers designing the global Covid-19 response plan also represent a formal and authoritative type of power. One must therefore consider the nature of their interests (see 7.1). To this effect, it is also important to recognise that the reconfiguration of ground presence by international actors also culminates from a form of power. As evidenced, their decisions had a significant impact on LNNGOs as the only remaining actors on the ground. Covid-restrictions reshaped the institutional access context. However, LNNGOs committed to adapting to these mobility barriers at a time the international organisations in-country chose to not do the same. The thesis does not intend to assess the legitimacy of these decisions, but rather seeks to illustrate the inherently political environment giving rise to the mobilisation of response during Covid-19. Put simply, the structural environment shapes the actions of actors and vice versa.

Covid-19 created a context where mobilisation of humanitarian response relied on LNNGOs. Notably, international actors vacating their space on the ground (as stipulated by the GHRP, systemic mobility trends and evidenced in the focus countries) technically aligns with localisation commitments. However, key expert Sudhansu Singh warned of the "very ugly side of localisation" due to Covid-19. He argued international actors prioritised shifting risk away from themselves, under the veil of granting LNNGOs increased responsibility in response. It raises the question whether this was merely a temporary and tactical push to 'localise' response arising out of necessity, or whether it represents a

genuine commitment to systemic change? A shift of power requires increased access to the tools to navigate this novel context, such as funding and adequate support from international partners. It also hinges on actively reshaping the capacity narrative. The next two chapters explore these aspects.

7. The impact of Covid-19 on access to resources

In the pre-Covid humanitarian ecosystems, inequitable access to funding was identified as one of the main systemic manifestations of power imbalance between LNNGOs and international organisations (Chapter 5). As established, the Covid-19 context has highlighted the prominence of LNNGOs in Covid-19 response and increased responsibility in maintaining humanitarian response on the ground. This chapter aims to analyse whether funding structures have reflected the shift in responsibilities by channelling more funds to LNNGOs. Two key funding channels are explored. First, the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 (GHRP) as this reflects the systemic funding policies and tools developed by key decision-makers. Secondly, the impact on LNNGOs main funding channel, their 'fundermediaries' is explored. The chapter concludes with an overview of each focus country.

7.1 Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19

In March 2020, the United Nations launched the GHRP in response to Covid-19, jointly established by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and coordinated by UNOCHA. It sought to address both the primary health-related impacts of the pandemic, and the secondary consequences which exacerbating pre-existing crises and vulnerabilities (UNOCHA, 2021, p.10). This UN-led response plan represents the policies developed by the actors with most authority within the global humanitarian system. Significantly, it is a reflection of formal political power guiding bilateral donor funding; comprising the largest portion of systemic humanitarian assistance. The GHRP explicitly emphasised "the importance of involving and supporting local organisations… given the key role they are playing in the crisis" (2020, p.5). However, this recognition in theory does not guarantee that it will translate into practice. It is therefore important to reflect on the prescribed priorities and funding mechanisms.

The GHRP process for identifying the primary and secondary impacts (the priorities) is "to be identified through clusters and will be further consulted with partners including NGOs" (UNOCHA, 2020, p.38). Consequently, the process is likely to reflect the composition of clusters[4] in-country, which are predominantly UN-led. The input of LNNGOs is therefore likely contingent on their involvement in these clusters. As previously established, this varies significantly between countries. Furthermore, the selection process for NGO consultation is not clear. It is beyond the scope of the research to determine whether or not the identification of priorities accurately reflects national priorities or not. However, the point is to illustrate that the process is by default internationally-driven through the clusters. The involvement of national actors will therefore depend on each unique actor ecosystem and the centrality of the cluster system within this.

The GHRP explicitly states that "whenever they are best placed to respond, this funding should be allocated as directly as possible to local and national actors", in line with the Grand Bargain commitments (UNOCHA, 2020, p.38). To this effect, the plan encouraged donors (mainly bilateral) to

[4] Also known as the interagency sectors (like in Uganda)

allocate funds to the UN-managed pooled funding mechanisms (UNOCHA, 2020). This is relevant as they are regarded the most accessible and flexible direct funding channel for LNNGOs. The systemic trends discussed in 6.1 have evidenced that as the pandemic progressed, humanitarian actors have identified LNNGOs as 'best placed to respond'. Consequently, the expected funding trend would be that direct funding allocation to LNNGOs will be substantial during the pandemic.

7.1.1 UN-managed pooled funding mechanisms

This section takes a closer look at how the UN-managed pooled funding mechanisms were leveraged during the pandemic, as part of the GHRP. The specific mechanisms refer to the Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). CBPFs are directed towards the 18 countries subject to the most urgent humanitarian crises, South Sudan included. CERF on the other hand is originally designed to enable rapid funding to UN organisations as primary recipients. The funds are then cascaded to the LNNGO implementing partners on the ground (UNOCHA, 2019, p.13). However, branded as "innovating to respond to Covid", CERF developed a pilot whereby funds were directly channeled to NGOs (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.10). This seems like a significant improvement in theory, by widening the access landscape for LNNGOs to a key funding channel. For example, B4 detailed the need to have institutional partnerships with UN agencies in order to access CERF funding (pre-Covid) is *"really tough as a local organisation"*. Both South Sudan and Bangladesh were part of this pilot. However, unfortunately none of the interview participants explicitly mentioned it when asked about funding sources. This suggests that they were not selected as participants or that it was not regarded as a significant development. Unfortunately, this means limited insight can be drawn on its virtue based on the primary research.

In total, $493 million was disbursed through the pooled funds in response to the primary and secondary impacts of Covid-19 between March-December 2021 (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.13). Table 5 provides an overview of the distribution channels in the focus countries (in millions).

Table 5: Covid-19 related pooled funds allocation

Country	Total allocation (millions)	CERF	UN	INGOs	LNNGOs	CBPF	UN	INGOs	LNNGOs
Bangladesh	6.0	6.0	3.0	1.5	1.5				
South Sudan	24.3	13.9	9.0	3.8	1.1	10.4	5.5	3.3	1.6
Uganda	0.1	0.1	0.1						

Source: Adapted from UNOCHA's GHRP for Covid-19: Final Progress Report, 2021, p.13

The data paints a bleak picture in terms of proportion of funds allocated directly to LNNGOs, despite their evidenced prominence in Covid-related response. It points to a continued systematic preference towards UN agencies and INGOs. The primary data collection echoes the same trend. Most LNNGO participants did not obtain funding from the pooled mechanisms, but remained dependent on international partners for funding. For reference, INGO respondents were also asked whether they

obtained funds via pooled funding mechanisms. Five out of nine declared that they received funding from CBPFs, CERFs or other dedicated Covid-19 pooled funds; some from more than one. Although the sample size is too small to be deemed representative, it evidences that international research participants were more easily able to access the pooled funding than the local research participants.

However, it is important to caveat that this only provides a partial picture. Specific appeals were also collected through the GHRP but not distributed via the pooled funding; reflecting bilateral donors' allocation preferences. This includes a separate Rohingya Crisis Appeal, Bangladesh intersectoral appeal, South Sudan Interagency appeal and the Uganda intersectoral appeal (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.6-7). Thus, the seemingly small allocation to Uganda in table 5 only represents one funding tool; albeit a very significant one in the Covid-response policy context. Unfortunately, data on the amount of funding cascaded from international intermediaries to LNNGOs via the different GHRP appeals is not available. This is attributed to a systemic lack of transparency regarding funding flows beyond first-level recipients of funds, which has again been reiterated in the Covid context (GHA, 2021; HPG, 2021, p.99; UNOCHA, 2021a;2021b).

The final GHRP progress report, published in February 2021, hailed the virtue of CBPFs and CERF for supporting "localised front-line response to the pandemic" (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.10). CBPFs were quoted as continuing to be the largest source of funding for LNNGOs, both in terms of the pandemic and other humanitarian crises. However, it is important to recognise that CBPFs only exist in 18 countries, whereas the GHRP was aimed at 44 countries. Nevertheless, the report stated that 32 percent of Covid-related CBPF funding "benefited local and national actors" (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.10). At face value, this exceeds the Grand Bargain target of 25 percent. However, the vague wording 'benefited' is significant. Looking at the breakdown of funds, LNNGOs only obtained 19.5 percent (49.1 million) of the $251.7 million Covid-related CBPF funding directly (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.13). Significantly, the report does not transparently account for its assessment of 32 per cent, thus it is unclear how this 'benefit' was derived.

UN agencies self-reported that they on average passed 11 percent of funds obtained via the pooled funding mechanisms to implementing partners (UNOCHA, 2021a, p.9). This means that 89% of the funds allocated to UN agencies through the promoted funding mechanism never reached the 'best placed' responders on the ground. This raises questions regarding the effectiveness of funding leveraged to respond to Covid-19. Although systemic change is not expected to happen over-night, it suggests that funding in response to Covid largely mirrored the inefficiencies long-engrained in humanitarian response. Consequently, the analysis of the funding mechanisms presented in this section do not align expected trend. GHRP funding allocations are not deemed to adequately reflect the increased reliance on LNNGOs during the pandemic.

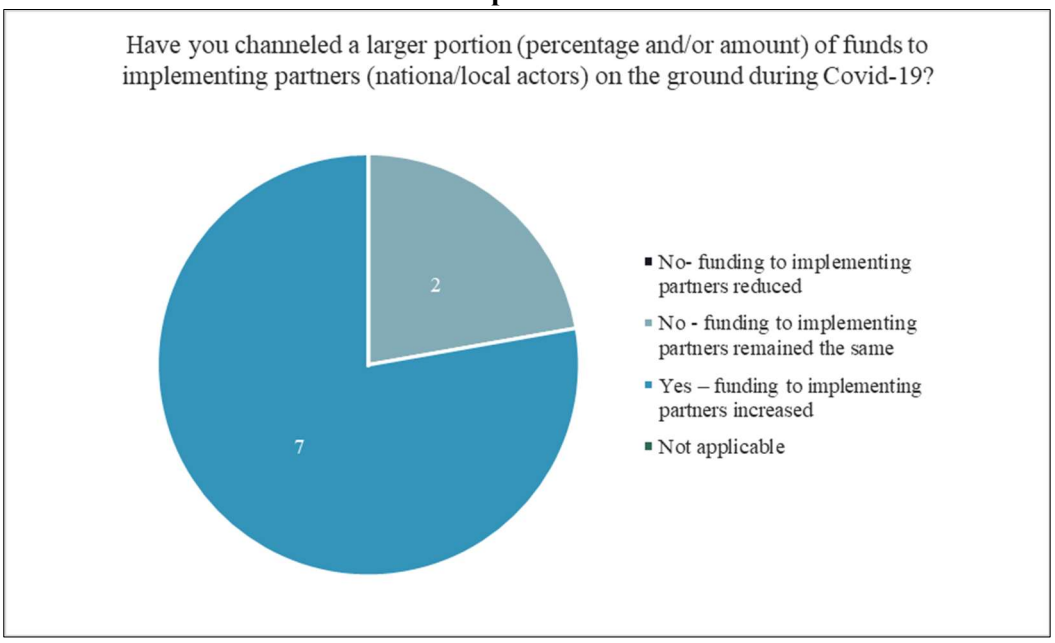
Finally, the analysis takes a brief bigger-picture look at the wider humanitarian financing ecosystem beyond the Covid-19 related response. According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance report, overall

funding patterns to first-level recipients remained unchanged from the year prior. Only 3.1% of funds went directly to LNNGOs in 2020 (GHA, 2021, p.65); evidencing that the dissemination of direct funding did not significantly change in the face of Covid-19. The report also highlights that indirect funding likely represents a larger proportion of funding to LNNGOs (GHA, 2021, p.69), as explored in the next section.

7.2 Fundermediaries

Using primary data from the surveys and interviews, this section explores how the prominent 'fundermediary' channel was impacted by Covid-19. All INGO survey respondents stipulated that Covid-19 response was either embedded into existing activities, or implemented in addition to these. Activities were predominantly implemented through existing partnerships, with three respondents also leveraging new partnerships. Only two also involved their own staff. Evidently, the rhetoric echoes a reliance on LNNGOs which warrants the question if the funding patterns mirrored the trend. The results as presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: INGO funds channeled to LNNGO partners



Seven responded that funding to implementing partners (the LNNGOs) increased. Only two said it remained the same, but none said the funding reduced. This contrasts with the unanimous perception of LNNGO participants that funding decreased as a result of the pandemic. Two key factors may explain the inconsistency between the findings from INGOs and LLNGOs. Firstly, INGO respondents are reporting at a global scale compared rather than country-level. Secondly, certain types of LNNGOs were significantly favoured. As emphasised in the interviews, health-focused partners and those deemed to have greater capacity were prioritised (see 7.2.1). Consequently, smaller local organisations were particularly marginalised in the funding landscape.

7.2.1 Dependency paradox

The dependency culture whereby LNNGOs rely on international partners for funding to operate was exacerbated by Covid. It gave rise to the same paradox across all three countries. Despite the clear evidence of local organisations' strategic value, many were forced to close because their funding channels were compromised. Several of the LNNGOs interviewed had been forced to lay-off staff. Participants provided a largely unanimous explanation for this trend. The shock caused by Covid-19 on bilateral donor economies has resulted in less funding awarded to INGOs and UN agencies. However, in relative terms, international actors continued to receive the vast majority of funds despite the fact they were not the ones implementing response on the ground. Less funding cascaded down than usual. The added irony here is that operating costs for LNNGOs also increased. Highlighted in the interviews, this was attributed to purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE), adapting programmes to restrictions, and needing to distribute sanitary items and PPE to vulnerable populations too. Covid is therefore seen as having exposed yet another symptom of unbalanced power dynamics shaped by access to resources. It has also reiterated the importance – yet complexity – of questions pertaining to the distribution of funding based on the comparative advantage of different actors in the sector.

The impact of the dependency paradox also manifested through a funding diversion away from non-health focused partners. Fundermediaries determined what partners and interventions to prioritise, resulting in decisions that did not accurately reflect the local contextual needs. For example, SS7 deemed the prioritisation of health-partners for Covid-interventions as a missed opportunity, as *"campaigning and awareness raising doesn't require a health background".* Consequently, interventions would have benefitted more from LNNGO closeness to their communities. The fund diversion was felt strongest in South Sudan, where *"everything is being channelled to health" (SS1)*, despite the wider protracted crisis. It resulted in the perceptions that

> *"Those who were lucky enough was those who are into health… because when the money came, they [international organisations] already know who are their health partners, and those who are not their health partners were never prioritised." (SS7)*

Some LNNGOs, such as SS6 which is deemed to be an established and well-capacitated organisation by international partners, was able to adapt to *"indulge in the health sector"*. Albeit not as polarising in the other countries, the same trend was observed. For example, the *"funding split"* resulting in *"local actors have now more limited access to funds" (B7)* in Bangladesh. The *"lack of funds"* is also pervasive in Uganda where local NGOs are *"trying to resume their work" (U6)*. It is therefore important to recognise the positions of power maintained by fundermediaries in making partnership decisions in the Covid-19 context.

7.3 Country overviews

Despite similarities in general trends, the impact of the described dependency culture varied significantly between countries. This section aims to provide a brief overview of how the agency of LNNGOs was affected, by reflecting on the direct funding, fundermediary channels and alternative resources.

7.3.1 Uganda

Direct funds to LNNGOs were *"very meagre" (U4)*. Referencing the Covid response fund in Uganda, U5 highlighted the irony that direct funding should have gone to the local actors on the ground at the time INGOs and UN agencies were working remotely, but still did not. They expressed frustration at the inefficient use of funds due to high costs of the international organisations, proclaiming *"why not give it to the people who are on the ground?"* All participants referenced the issues of LNNGO closures due to the dependency on intermediaries. Traditional funding structures significantly compromised the agency of LNNGOs in terms of depriving them access to funding.

However, it has also created motivation and momentum amongst LNNGOs to sever the dependency to improve their agency. There is an increased ambition to increase strategies for local resource mobilisation. As explained by one participant: *"if the funding basket [external/traditional] reduces further, it's going to affect the sustainability of local organisations unless something else is done"* (U5). On a positive note, Covid illustrated the potential for this, as large contributions were made from Uganda's private sector for the first time. In fact, four participants specifically mentioned the potential behind leveraging the private sector. Enthusiasm was fuelled by the government's pre-existing initiative to ensure multi-sectoral contribution within the CRRF in Uganda, which already has a private sector representative. Covid-19 was also identified as an opportunity to improve and utilise the government's existing Contingencies Fund, which was leveraged by the Covid-19 Taskforce (U1). Although the operationalisation was not seamless, it points to the virtue of alternatives for resource mobilisation nationally. At a smaller scale, individuals and communities also stepped up with resource donations.

Finally, participants referenced the virtue of non-UN managed pooled funds such as the Start Fund, and ELNHA (via Oxfam). These mechanisms existed prior to Covid-19 and are aimed at LNNGOs. Significantly, they are not routed via the UN-managed mechanisms. Funds originate from both bilateral donors and private foundations. Despite their much smaller scale compared to UN-managed mechanism, the positive experiences of mobilising funds during Covid-19 have increased enthusiasm for these funding tools. Representatives from the Charter4Change working group shared that they are working on new resource mobilisation strategies, suggesting the funding channels may be subject to change in future to sever the dependency ties.

7.3.2 Bangladesh

The dependency challenges were substantial in Bangladesh. This issue was highlighted by all participants in Bangladesh (except one). Covid-19's impact on funding flows was deemed disruptive and negative. Several participants even caveated that they had been affected despite their track-record of strong partnerships, evidencing the penetration of the trend. A representative from Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO forum highlighted that although UN-pooled funding is instrumental, signatories of the Grand Bargain have continued to disregard their commitments. Failures to leverage the traditional aid channels efficiently has led to an HCCT meeting between UNHCR and NAHAB (representing LNNGOs) to discuss *"how localisation can contribute to the humanitarian-development nexus"* going forward (B7)[5]. The outcomes culminating from these talks remain to be seen.

However, several participants expressed frustration, stating that Covid-19 has evidenced that international organisations engage in *"localisation talk, but not the walk"* (B1). Subsequently, it has fueled the pre-existing appetite towards alternative resource mobilisation. Simultaneously, Covid-19 evidenced that many other sources are available to LNNGOs. The NAHAB chairman shared a mapping tool detailing all LNNGO Covid-19 response. The tool tracked the origins of funding contributions, evidencing sources such as the private sector and private foundations. It also included some direct bilateral donations and INGO channels (NAHAB, 2021). Reflecting on discussions had within the alliance network, he shared that LNNGOs are particularly interested in promoting contributions from the private sector going forward. They have hosted an online forum specifically to discuss Covid response and private sector engagement. NAHAB is also working on strategies to embrace these opportunities going forward; a testament to the collective agency and adaptability of LNNGOs,

As in Uganda, participants spoke of the virtue of non-UN-managed pooled funding mechanisms. Participant B2, a recipient of the Start Fund detailed how this provided funding much quicker than the government, international partners or the multilateral funds. Albeit much smaller in scale, it offers success stories of effective resource channels exclusively for LNNGOs. Finally, B1 highlighted the *"huge amounts of local initiatives – not dependent on donor funds or foreign aid",* referring to social capital via the Whole of Society Approach. Covid-19 is seen as reinforcing the need to acknowledge the virtue of these initiatives. It also represents the drive voiced by many participants to push for more sustainable interventions embedded in community-driven and local approaches.

7.3.3 South Sudan

The resounding perception is that funding intended for Covid-19 related interventions were channeled to international organisations whereas *"local partners that were on the frontline were not given any" (SS7).* In contrast, the SSHF (2020, p.1) stated that "it continued to promote localisation by channeling 33%" to LNNGOs, either directly or via sub-contracting.[6] SS6, one of its recipients, echoed that the

[5] Note: meeting was scheduled for the week after the thesis interview, so the outcomes are not known.
[6] This figure represents non-Covid-related interventions too.

funding to local partners increased *"thanks to Covid"* but caveated that the funding only reaches a very small number of eligible partners. Furthermore, it only represents a small portion of total funding in South Sudan (see 5.1.3). Consequently, Covid has illustrated that the SSHF is a valuable funding mechanism for reaching eligible LNNGOs, but that access needs to be improved in order to realise its potential.

The pre-Covid status of LNNGOs therefore acted as an indicator for determining their inclusion in the Covid-19 funding climate. Pre-existing access restrictions to the SSHF enhanced the feeling of marginalisation as they were left dependent on project-based funding from intermediaries. These organisations were worst hit due to fund diversion and fund retention in the aid delivery chain. Based on impressions gathered in the interviews, this constitutes most LNNGOs, forcing many to close or lay off staff. Despite the lack of resource mobilisation, LNNGOs continued to engage in project implementation to the extent possible. All participants echoed the same solution; a desire to obtain access to direct funding from bilateral donors, to sever the dependency.

8. The impact of Covid-19 on (re)defining agential roles and relationships

The dominant capacity discourse was deemed a key expression of power imbalance in the pre-Covid humanitarian ecosystems due to its impact on shaping agential roles and relationships (Chapter 5). It was regarded as both sustaining and legitimising the subordinate roles of LNNGOs, manifested through the sub-contracting dynamic. Furthermore, the narrative itself was considered biased by disregarding the comparative capacity strengths of LNNGOs, resulting in their systemic marginalisation. This chapter aims to analyse how Covid-19 has impacted the agency of LNNGOs in regards to these two aspects.

8.1 Power dynamics and relational roles

The following explores how the relational roles of LNNGOs have been shaped by Covid-19 within each focus country, taking into consideration both individual and collective agency.

8.1.1 Uganda: progress through complementarity

In Uganda, Covid-19 created a context where local and international actors alike have come together to promote local leadership. The C4C Working Group in Uganda was praised for functioning as a unified advocacy platform. They released a statement at the beginning of the pandemic urging INGOs, donors and UN agencies to leverage Covid as an opportunity to reshape the humanitarian system in Uganda (C4C Working Group Uganda, 2020). Participants explained that the advocacy aimed to leverage institutional support and funding from international partners to ensure LNNGOs could effectively fill the 'gap' of vacated space by international actors.

To this effect, participants shared several examples of partnership good-practice. Most significantly, LNNGOs became more *"intentional in putting local actors at the forefront" (U1)* of programmatic design and decision-making. Rather than receiving pre-designed projects, LNNGOs *"designed the project ourselves"* and *"then approached potential donors [INGO partners]"* (U4), which is a novel development. Complementarity of roles changed:

> *"We were the one managing our project ourselves. So, the only thing they did was providing the financial support. And I think this is also the same with the so many local actors involved in local response for COVID-19" (U4)*

Participants were generally optimistic towards the increase in supportive and complementary partnerships. However, supportive partners were typically identified as those already promoting localisation through the Charter4Change pre-Covid. Furthermore, participants caveated equitable partnerships remain contingent on improving the quality of funding too. Nevertheless, the context has culminated in an increased recognition and appreciation of local actors at the forefront. As stated by participant U1:

"Covid-19 has provided an audience to listen to our proposals and a platform to articulate our issues – no one could deny that".

Local forums, such as Acholi have also increased attention from international partners. U2 shared that an event is planned with INGOs to *"promote localisation into reality"*, evidencing increased dialogue[7]. Finally, collaboration between LNNGOs was regarded as very positive, especially via local coordination platforms. U4 stated "*the impact of Covid, is that it kind of in a way helped local actors to understand and also appreciate the concept of working in consortiums"*. Half the participants explicitly mentioned the intention to keep working in consortiums going forward due to their virtue in pooling resources and knowledge. Consequently, there is increased enthusiasm amongst LNNGOs regarding to power of collective agency.

8.1.2 Bangladesh: recognition and collective agency

In Bangladesh, participants spoke of modest but positive progress in terms of international partnership dynamics. They attributed the change to acknowledgment of their comparative advantages as local actors for delivering effective risk communication and sensitisation campaigns. The opportunity for LNNGOs to lead and design response has also resulted in a more attentive international audience interested in their experiences, as explained by B4:

"During the Covid what we have seen, you know, that experiences and that trust [from communities] gives us extra mileage! So now many international organisations, they agreed … without local organisation we cannot reach the unreached people… I was also invited to different international programme or session to talk about my experiences in the ground. So, and I have seen some changes happening!"

The Chairman of NAHAB shared that LNNGOs have leveraged this momentum to push the conversation regarding equitable partnerships with the INGO forum; to *"take cognizance of the capacity of local oganisations"*. As noted by LNNGOs working in Cox's Bazar, INGOs have increasingly come forward to offer their support. However, experiences are not unanimous. About half of the participants reported largely unchanged dynamics in the realm of pre-existing humanitarian interventions. They referred specifically to the continuation of sub-contracting through funding trends. In this regard, LNNGOs are losing patience with international partners for not honouring their formal localisation commitments; a reality again evidenced through the pandemic.

Collective agency has continued to be strong in Bangladesh. LNNGO platforms and coordination bodies have been leveraged effectively for information and lesson sharing. Like in Uganda, several participants spoke of the virtue of joining consortiums. Furthermore Covid-19 response has been a predominantly

[7] Event took place after the interview

nationally-owned process through collaboration between LNNGOs and the Government (local and national). This has aligned with LNNGO localisation ambitions (as articulated through NAHAB) to strengthen locally-led humanitarian response through relationship-building between national actors.

8.1.3 South Sudan: tactical reconfiguration

During Covid-19, inequitable partnerships remained the status-quo. As previously mentioned, UN agencies approached a select few LNNGOs in South Sudan and "*asked us to take over" (SS2)* vacated spaces previously occupied by INGOs. SS2 had to relocate field teams on a semi-permanent basis to navigate the institutional mobility barriers to facilitate this. Despite its small scale, at first glance, this could be seen as progress for shifting power to LNNGOs by increasing their responsibilities. SS6 shared that LLNGOs initially looked forward to establishing partnerships with international organisations. They hoped the internationally-dominated humanitarian sphere would become more inclusive for local organisations. However, they were only sub-contracted on a temporary basis as opposed to via equitable partnerships. LNNGOs were on the ground but lacked autonomy. The impermanence of the shift thus seems to represent a tactical as opposed to systemic role reconfiguration.

Pe-existing imbalances have been sustained. International partners were deemed gatekeepers facilitating response despite reduced presence on the ground. Actors with access to the SSHF had the opportunity to form consortia with international actors and *"work together to develop proposals for funding… I think that alone was a good step forward" (SS6).* Despite this positive development, the majority of LNNGOs felt left out. This illustrates the complexity of the operating environment, and significant differences in experience amongst LNNGOs in-country. SS1 spoke of competition being sustained; actors with high *'programmatic or financial capacity'* out-competed smaller organisations, despite their proximity to communities. Non-Covid-related humanitarian projects were also put on hold by many international partners. SS5 related this back to the capacity-based issue of trust:

> *"Because most of international NGOs, they don't they don't trust you if you don't intervene with them physically and they tell you exactly [what to do]"*

Unlike the other two focus countries, collective agency through local networks was not discussed by participants. Instead, leadership of Covid-response predominantly echoed traditional roles and responsibilities, spearheaded by the HCT. Although little change has materialised, the realisation that LNNGOs were unable to fill the gap on the ground left by the international community due to systemic barriers, has increased the appetite for change (see 9.1.1).

8.2 The intermediary roles

Roles are dynamic, and may be reshaped through interactions and negotiations with other actors along the aid chain. It is particularly relevant to understand how Covid-19 has affected the perspectives of intermediaries such as INGOs, given the nature of their relationships with LNNGOs. Although the findings are not directly associated with the focus countries, this aims to complement the LNNGO perspectives by taking stock of trends at the wider systemic level.

Figure 5: Covid-19's impact on locally-led response[8]

Please use the scale below to provide your perspective on the following statements:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Covid-19 has increased the recognition and visibility of national/local NGOs in humanitarian response			1	5	3
Covid-19 has evidenced that local NGOs are able to deliver effective and efficient humanitarian response			1	5	3
The Covid-19 context (access and mobility restrictions for international partners) has increased the leadership roles of local/national NGO partners in programme design and delivery			3	5	1
Local actors have had greater influence in multi-stakeholder humanitarian coordination networks (such as Humanitarian Country Teams, Cluster/Sector working groups, etc.)			8	1	
Multi-stakeholder dialogue between donors, INGOs and local actors has increased		1	2	6	

The five indicators in Figure 5 were developed to capture the impact on key relational dynamic issues, as identified during the interviews.[9] Positive results are reported for each indicator except the influence in multi-stakeholder coordination networks. This may reflect interview findings that national coordination networks were more significant during this period (except in South Sudan). Furthermore, not all LNNGOs want more influence within the multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms, as evidenced in Bangladesh. Notably, three participants responded 'neutral' to whether Covid-19 has increased the leadership roles of LNNGOs in programme design. However, this is likely a reflection of prior 'localisation' commitments, as some INGOs have been more supportive in this regard pre-Covid.

The most positive results are reported for Covid-19 increasing the recognition and visibility of LNNGOs in humanitarian response, and that it has evidenced they are able to deliver effective and efficient humanitarian response. Significantly, both these reinforce the capacity narrative promoted by LNNGOs. Multi-stakeholder dialogue has also reportedly improved, which is important for enabling a more direct communication stream between donors and local responders. These findings are significant, as changes in relational roles may create increased room to manoeuvre power dynamics. Furthermore, they provide insight into the specific role that Covid-19 has played in reconfiguring these relational dynamics.

[8] The results are evidenced using a heatmap, supplemented by the number of respondents
[9] The survey was disseminated after most interviews were completed, but prior to the formal coding and analysis process.

8.3 Shifting the capacity narrative?

This section analyses whether Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst for reframing the dominant capacity narrative responsible for sustaining the subordinate role of LNNGOs.

8.3.1 Technology: a manifestation of power imbalance

Covid-19 has presented a systemic case-study illustrating the stark contrast between capacity inherent to LNNGOs on the ground, contrasted with the 'technical' capacity reliant on resources which the humanitarian system currently affords local actors through international intermediaries. The most obvious example is the systemic 'dependency paradox' (7.2.1). However, a new phenomenon of increased reliance on information and communication technology presents a more subtle, yet significant manifestation of this power imbalance.

Technology has been a cross-cutting theme mentioned by participants in all countries, despite not compromising an explicit part of the interview guide. Its two-fold impact is dichotomous. On the negative note, many LNNGOs do not have funding resources that enable investment in infrastructure. Consequently, the added costs for software for online collaboration environments (such as Zoom), and the need to pay for modems for internet or airtime for calling presented additional costs. Consequently, many organisations did not have the funds readily available to adapt to the online environment. Subsequently, many LNNGOs were further marginalised; a trend expressed across all countries. However, the effects were most severe in South Sudan due to the poor ICT infrastructure at a national level. SS7 contrasted this with international partners that left the country who had *"access to power 24/7. People like us, we don't have that advantage!"* The issue was summarised by Key Expert 2, working as a coordinator for Charter4Change globally:

> *"And again, that highlighted, you know, that institutional support is not being given to local organisations, and many of them, they did not have the resources to connect digitally"*

A survey respondent also commented:

> *"I also notice how INGOs have gadgets and technology allowing us to pivot to remote work easily. This is not true for local actors. Maybe this in an area where we can support quickly." (R3)*

Furthermore, the dichotomy is that for LNNGOs with sufficient access to technology, the transfer to the online environment presented an opportunity. Around half the participants in Uganda and Bangladesh thus regarded it as positive. As stated by *U5 "it increased the participation of local and national actors in decision-making".* Despite the negative immediate impact, there may therefore be room for manoeuvre. Evidently, some of the barriers are inherent to national infrastructure (as in South Sudan). Nonetheless, Covid has evidenced that certain types of technical and system-based capacities

can only be afforded through better quality funding. Consequently, the institutional flaws have been highlighted at a magnified scale, along with an identification of the political work necessary to fix it.

8.3.2 From capacity-building to capacity-strengthening

LNNGOs across all three countries echoed enthusiasm that Covid-19 has offered the humanitarian system a more accurate evidence-base for what constitutes capacity. Firstly, in terms of mobility; LNNGOs have maintained their presence on the ground meanwhile international organisations have been relatively incapacitated. The operating context has undoubtedly been complex, but LNNGOs have evidenced more agility and innovation to adapt. Crucially, they have done so despite limited resources and the continued imbalance of traditional funding streams. This is particularly prominent in Bangladesh and Uganda; whereby social capital and alternative funding sources have been mobilised. Notwithstanding, South Sudanese LNNGOs still grappled with issues pertaining to lack of trust from international partners.

Secondly, Covid-19 has illustrated the leadership capacity of LNNGOs, informed by strategic access relative to other actors, and contextual knowledge. The point is not that this is an entirely new revelation; the closeness of LNNGOs to their communities has long been accepted as a virtue. However, participants identified the scale of visibility and recognition of capacity as novel to the Covid-19 context. This is echoed by the relational perspectives of INGOs (8.2). Consequently, it as illustrated the inherent flaws in the traditional capacity narrative at a mass-scale. It has offered a strong evidence base for the LNNGOs preferred narrative; centred on capacity-sharing rather than capacity building.

9. Perspectives on Covid-19: a political opportunity for systemic change?

This chapter builds on previous chapters to explore whether Covid-19 presents a political opportunity for shifting power to LNNGOs. It aims to analyse humanitarian actors' perspectives on the event to understand how it has affected incentives for change.[10] It is important to caveat that the systemic impact of Covid-19 is still evolving. The analysis does therefore not exclusively reflect on whether systemic change has already happened, but also whether there is increased momentum to mobilise change. The chapter first presents the perceptions of LNNGOs in the three focus countries. It proceeds to consider perceptions of actors further up the aid-chain where the concentration of power resides, focusing on INGOs and donors.

9.1 Primary change agents: local and national organisations

The perceptions of LNNGOs provides insight into how similar trends across the contexts have actually manifested very differently, depending on the opportunities that LNNGOs have been able to leverage. In this section, the term 'localisation' is frequently used to represent the specific Grand Bargain commitments international humanitarian actors made to shift power to LNNGOs. However, it is important to recognise that it has been conceptualised slightly differently in each context (as illustrated in Chapter 5).

9.1.1 Uganda

Starting with Uganda, participants consistently voiced that Covid-19 has given local actors a chance to demonstrate the capacity of local actors in delivering effective humanitarian response to vulnerable populations. As stated by U4:

> *"COVID-19 has given local actors a free and open space for local actors to demonstrate their potential when it comes to delivering humanitarian responses that are timely, appropriate, relevant, and that are fitting the international humanitarian standards and principles."*

Furthermore, Covid-19 has created an operating context resulting in increased visibility and recognition within Uganda's humanitarian ecosystem. Participants explicitly emphasised the value of having improved engagement with the Government, multilateral UN agencies, and INGO partners. They also hailed increased collaboration between LNNGOs through consortiums and local forums as significant progress to be continued post-Covid. However, the seemingly positive mindset is significantly constrained by disappointment in the lack of structural change in the funding landscape. Several participants articulated this frustration:

[10] The research adopts Tarrow's (2011, p.163) definition of political opportunity as the "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure".

"It should have been during this period, that actually local actors should have been funded directly more than before… If they wanted to fund us, then it should have been!" (U5)

The Covid-19 context is therefore partially framed as a missed opportunity for honouring localisation commitments within the 'traditional' humanitarian system. As a result, most participants were apprehensive to hail it as evidencing localisation progress, resulting in a more modest appraisal. Notwithstanding, there is increased momentum for change, represented by a shift in mindset. To this effect, U4 stated:

"This presents an opportunity for local actors from this time moving forward… as part of this recognition local actors could attract more resources [than] what they used to receive".

The Covid-19 context is perceived as strengthening pre-existing initiatives to support local leadership in-country through the Charter4Change Working Group; evidenced through the international-local collaboration on advocacy. It has streamlined a unified message, transparently and openly promoting complementary partnerships, led by LNNGOs. U5 also stated it has increased engagement of local partners in 'localisation' fora at the international systemic level. The novel context has thus created a strategic opportunity to mobilise action, which actors leading the localisation agenda in Uganda are actively trying to do.

9.1.2 Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, Covid-19 has impacted the distribution of power in two key ways. Firstly, it has led to increased recognition of local leadership. Prior to Covid-19, participants regarded international adherence to localisation commitments as externally driven, and felt unable to effect change. Using a Bangladeshi proverb to illustrate this point:

"There is a saying here in our country that 'if somebody don't get down in the water, they will not learn how to swim'. So, the first thing is you have to get down to the water!" (B1)

LNNGOs have been waiting for international actors to let them into the water, without being granted access. Now, Covid has offered this opportunity to evidence their capacity, leadership and comparative advantages. As a result, participants have seen positive shifts in the mindsets of international actors. LNNGOs have received increased *"support and recognition from the government and INGOs; so this is the huge scope for us now!" (B4).* Progress on this front is notable given its prior identification as a key barrier in Bangladesh. As a result, B4 explicitly claimed that Covid-19 has already started to catalyse transformative change. B7 also stated it has opened up dialogue about local funding and the need to improve funding structures, by evidencing systemic flaws of current structures. However, they

also voiced apprehension whether this opportunity can be leveraged; if the funding climate is reduced, intermediaries will struggle to keep afloat, thus may not pass on sufficient funds. However, others were more optimistic that the role of intermediaries may be diminished altogether, as increased visibility may culminate in better direct access to donors. In effect, the trend offers anecdotal (and modest) evidence of shift of power to LNNGOs, but not at a systemic level.

The second structural shift is situated outside the realm of the formal humanitarian system. It centres around increased momentum for an alternative pathway for shifting power to LNNGOs. Despite the enthusiasm for increased recognition, LNNGOs are disappointed by the lack of adequate funding support. Simultaneously, Covid-19 has evidenced the potential for alternative resource mobilisation. This has resulted in increased effort *"to promote contribution from the private sector" (B7)* as well as *"local resources" (B1).* B6 also expressed concern that the humanitarian financing gap will increase at a systemic scale due to Covid. Therefore, out of necessity to adapt, there is momentum to sever the dependency on traditional structures. To this effect, participants frequently spoke about Covid-19 as exposing the importance of sustainable interventions along the humanitarian-development nexus, to ensure Bangladesh maintains its development progress. The evidence of alternative resource mobilisation coupled with strategic power of local networks and liaising with local government institutions has fueled momentum for an alternative pathway to change.

9.1.3 South Sudan

Perceptions from LNNGOs in South Sudan unanimously suggest that Covid-19 has not resulted in a structural shift of power nor shifted expectation for localisation progress. This contrasts with initial attitudes at the beginning of the pandemic, which echoed more enthusiasm for positive change. SS1 shared:

> *"We were expecting now because of this COVID-19. Now, INGOs may also reduce their presence and also replace their, the places with national NGOs. That was what we were expecting… But everything - everybody is maintaining"*

SS6 explained *"Everybody was looking forward to working with partners. But with the conversation of vaccines in place… everyone is getting back to the previous comfort zone."* This echoes Sudhansu Singh's warning that 'ugly localisation' may occur whereby the desire to shift risk results in a tactical transfer of roles rather than systemic change. This sentiment was reiterated by *SS2 "when normality came back, everybody who ran away came back. And everyone went back to their own duties".* Therefore, framed as a missed opportunity, most participants spoke of the 'status-quo' by international actors being maintained. This relates not only to the sub-contracting partnership practices, but also the lack of inclusion in formal coordination mechanisms. Most pressingly, no substantial improvements were made in access to direct funding. Thus, localisation barriers are seen as sustained.

However, a small spark has been ignited signifying an increased appetite for change. SS4 mentioned that Covid-19 has highlighted the need to push for a culture of less dependency. Similarly, SS6 identified that *"Covid-19 makes it easier to propel agenda forward by reducing institutional mindset that local actors are competitors to international ones"* by having evidenced their comparative advantages. In contrast, typically smaller actors who felt increasingly marginalised voiced fears that competition for funding might increase. Finally, Covid-19 exposed the marginalisation of civil society in South Sudan, given that the majority of South Sudan's population dependency on the externally-driven humanitarian system. To this effect, SS4 said that *"I think now is the time to change the way of doing things"*; to ensure they *"still have resilience"*. The gap left by international actors exacerbated vulnerabilities, and as a result:

> *"The conversation around localisation started to kick off… we have continued these conversations with donors and with other multilaterals… looking keenly at the need to work with local actors" (SS6)*

As the impact continues to evolve, some are therefore retaining hope that Covid-19 may have positive impacts further up the aid-chain.

9.2 Intermediary agents: INGOs

INGO survey respondents were asked a series of questions to ascertain whether they perceive Covid-19 as a political opportunity. Figure 6 explores how Covid-19 has impacted their pre-existing commitments to shift power to LNNGO partners. These reflect formal Grand Bargain localisation commitments as encapsulated by the Charter4Change charter.

Figure 6: INGO localisation commitments

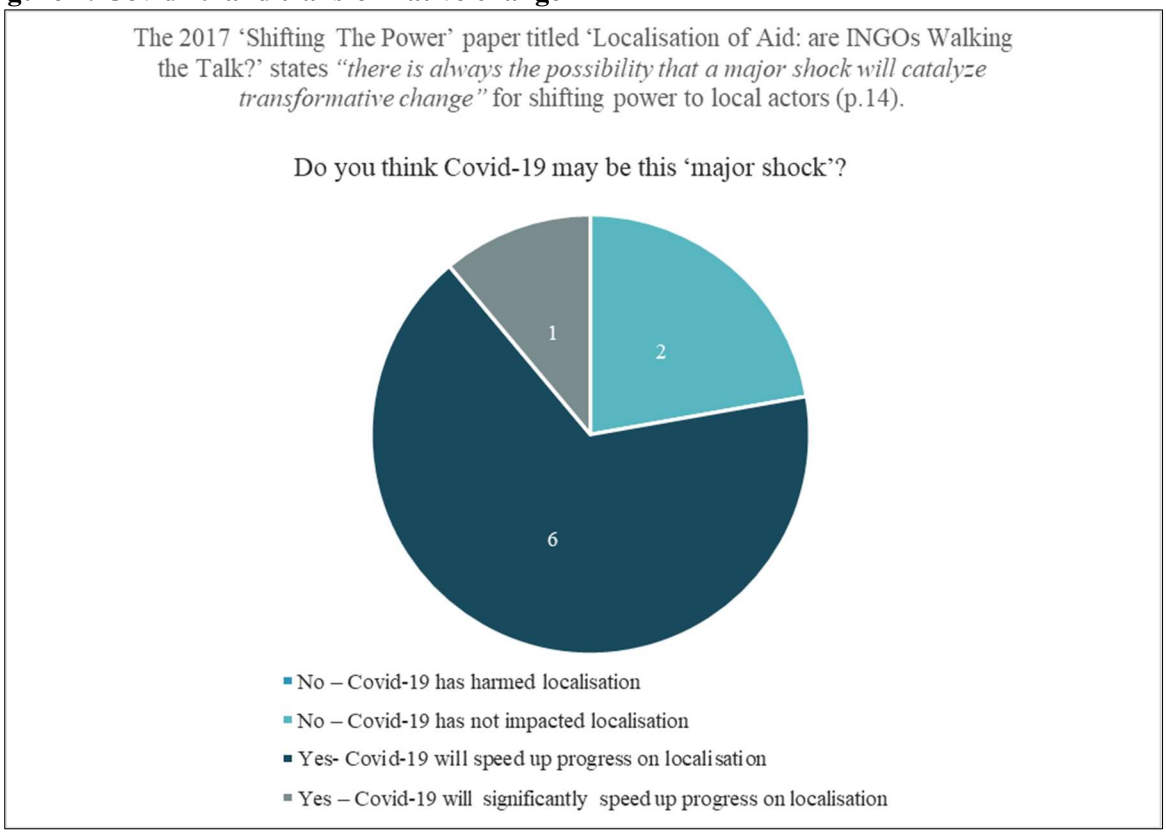
Please use the scale below to specify how COVID-19 has impacted your efforts to:	Significantly slowed progress	Slowed progress	No impact	Increased rate of progress	Significantly increased rate of progress
Strengthen partnerships with local actors			4	4	1
Emphasise the importance of national actors to humanitarian donors				6	3
Ensure equality in programmatic decision-making between INGOs and local partners			8	1	
Provide organisational support and capacity building		2	5	1	1
Promote the role of local actors to the media and public			3	4	2

Most categories are subject to a positive impact, but with a significant proportion selecting 'no impact'. This is likely a reflection of prior dedication to these points. Capacity-strengthening was most affected, due to *"the inability to be in-country" (R2)* and that *"sessions were cancelled" (R1)* due to Covid. The most significant development is that the context resulted in increased efforts to emphasise the importance of LNNGOs to humanitarian donors. Significantly, this aligns with LNNGO participants' unanimous emphasis on the instrumental value of direct contact. In addition, the increase of funding during Covid-19 by seven of nine respondents, as identified in 7.2 (Figure 4) reports progress on another key commitment. One respondent supplemented their response by remarking *"there was a significant*

shift and it did fast-track localisation agenda but not necessarily the shift of funds to local actors…. I have also noticed local resource mobilisation of resources triggered by the COVID response" (R3). Interestingly, this mirrors the observations made in Uganda and Bangladesh that despite lack of change in funding distribution, local resource mobilisation represents a significant development.

Referencing the 'Shifting the Power' (2017) paper on Localisation, INGOs were asked whether Covid-19 will act as a catalyst for transformative change (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Covid-19 and transformative change



No respondents believe Covid-19 has harmed localisation, whereas seven have identified Covid-19 as a catalyst for change. R5 justified their answer:

> *"It has been a catalyst for pushing the conversation and has provided critical proof of why localised aid is more effective, efficient and sustainable"*

Importantly, this reflects not only what has happened but what INGO practitioners think will happen. Three respondents caveated that continued progress requires institutional support from INGOs and 'international mechanisms'; evidencing that political will is rife. One respondent cautioned the importance to not *"snap back to previous modes of operation"* to ensure shift is not temporary. The only respondent to indicate that there has been no impact attributed this to *"major structures barriers and attitudes against it, mostly in the donor sector…This major shock has not been enough to change the general discourse on localisation in the sector".* Section 9.3 takes a closer look at these actors.

Finally, the survey also encouraged respondents to reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on the role and priorities of both INGOs and INGO country offices going forward. R8 emphasised the need to continue partnerships with local actors but regretted the *"business as usual when it comes to funding streams".* R7 embodied the calls made by LNNGOs for more sustainable interventions by respecting local coordination systems by *"mov[ing] to an area-based coordination system at local and country level in order to be more inclusive and work across the nexus".* They also highlighted the need to *"allow LNNGOs to be different from humanitarian actors"* and *"lead their response".* Significantly, this encourages local actors to pave the way by leveraging their comparative advantages. R3 stated that "*our role as INGOs need to change dramatically"* to reform the humanitarian system:

> *"Covid 19 highlighted gaps in the humanitarian system. Historically, the humanitarian system is organized largely around international actors and around big and dramatic disasters. The humanitarian system is built in reverse. We start with big problems and solutions are designed at the global level instead of the other way around"*

Combined, these developments may be significant for enabling a new systemic distribution of power. Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst for localisation in some key areas, whilst exposing systemic flaws that exacerbate vulnerabilities on the ground. Most urgently, the failure of funding streams during Covid-19 remains a threat. Leveraging this 'opportunity' to mobilise systemic change therefore hinges on the political will at the top of the aid chain.

9.3 Top of the aid chain

The Global Humanitarian Policy Forum (GHPF, 2020, p.3), hosted by UN OCHA brands itself as shaping the international humanitarian community's policy agenda. The 2020 GHPF was attended by 1,200 participants from over 80 countries (GHPF, 2020, p.3). Its outcome paper has a clear message: "2020 can become a watershed moment for positive change in the humanitarian system", identifying the pandemic as an "accelerator for change" (GHPF, 2020, p.24). It stresses the importance of applying the lessons learned from the pandemic by refocusing attention to the role of local actors and implementing localisation commitments.

The researcher attended events at the Humanitarian Networking and Policy Weeks (HNPW) in May 2021 to ascertain whether these 'lessons' have acquired political will and political space to be transformed. Donors, multilaterals and INGOs speaking at the HNPW events echoed a unified message; Covid-19 has caused disruption to the 'traditional' humanitarian business model and 'localisation' is more important than ever. There is increased political momentum around these commitments, as illustrated by the fact 'localisation' was a key priority area at the HNPW. Stated on the official website "the spread of COVID-19 in the last year has brought about additional recognition and insights into the

critical role and advantages local and national actors can bring to humanitarian response" (UNOCHA, 2021, n.p).

At the webinars, prominent bilateral donors frequently framed Covid-19 as a 'wake-up call' in the sector[11]. For example, Hilde Salvesen from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it even more clear that local first-line responders need to have bigger leadership role to meet vast humanitarian needs. Similarly, Stephen Williams from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office in the UK stated that "there is no longer need to sell the idea of localisation to donors; 2020 was a watershed moment when people realised the difficulties Covid-19 meant for international actors." Matt Kimmell, Director of Humanitarian Policy and Global Engagement at Global Affairs Canada declared that the pandemic has "forced our hand" and "brought the localisation agenda to the fore". He identified the key takeaway for donors and the wider humanitarian system to "better support and empower local actors as directly as possible by accelerating collective efforts" both in line with the Grand Bargain and wider collaboration along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Sharing a final example, Matthew Cogan from Irish Aid emphasised that Covid-19 has increased pressure from moving the localisation discussion away from INGO and UN-dominated spheres towards donors. This may offer a 'political opportunity' for advancing the agenda, as all LNNGO participants identified the strategic importance of gaining better direct access to donors, without intermediary layers.

The donor perspectives all emphasise that Covid-19 has evidenced a necessity to transform the traditional humanitarian system by empowering local humanitarian actors. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 is shifting expectations for 'localisation' success significantly; informed by the perception that reliance on LNNGOs is instrumental whilst also recognised as effective. Agents at the top of the aid chain, both policy makers and donors are expressing commitment to undertake collective action to reshape the system. However, although there are calls for transformation, the nature of potential reform is unclear at this stage.

[11] See comprehensive list of webinars and panellists in Appendix 3

10. Discussion

Thus far, the analysis has centred on identifying the key power imbalances for LNNGOs (Chapter 5), exploring structural and agency-based changes in the political economies of the focus countries due to Covid-19 (Chapters 6-8), and presenting humanitarian actors' perceptions on the significance of Covid-19 for catalysing systemic change by shifting power to LNNGOs (Chapter 9). The findings have illustrated that the global pandemic has resulted in systemic shocks, yet manifested very differently within the humanitarian contexts in South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh. This chapter aims to discuss the key findings by placing the analysis into a comprehensive framework. It integrates them into theoretical debates (from Chapter 2), and considers the wider implications of the research. It concludes by discussing the research limitations.

10.1 Mobilising the shift of power to LNNGOs

Situating the key findings within the conceptual framework (Figure 2), it is evident that the changes to *roles, discourse* and *resources* have affected *power* dynamics within each humanitarian political economy. Taking a wider systemic look, Covid-19 has been a catalyst for reframing the *perceptions* of key humanitarian actors. It has incentivised the need to shift power to LNNGOs through *structural* change, and increased recognition for their instrumental roles in humanitarian response. Although the insights are not entirely novel (Fast & Bennett, 2020; Gómez, 2021; Roepstorff, 2020) Covid-19 has exposed structural flaws compromising LNNGO *agency* at an unparalleled scale. As a result, INGOs and donors are calling for the need to *mobilise transformative change*; accelerating debates in policy spheres regarding localisation commitments. LNNGOs in the focus countries echo this sentiment, but are more modest in their appraisal of whether this will materialise, based on the lack of change to funding structures during the pandemic.

However, structure is multifaceted (Figure 1), situated on a material-to-social spectrum (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014). Consequently, although there is not much visible change in material structures (economic power), there has been a significant shift in power residing in more social structures (discourse, roles). Significantly, the political identities of LNNGOs are incrementally changing due to increased access to decision-making in partnerships and inclusion in multi-stakeholder fora. If agency continues to improve within this political structure, it increases potential to impact material structures.

The increased momentum aligns with Kent's (2017) hypothesis that catalysts for change stem from significant events. The nature of change (Steets et al., 2016) is significant for determining whether it presents a political opportunity. At a systemic scale, policies and structural changes adapting to a post-Covid humanitarian system are still evolving, resulting in an inconclusive assessment of its nature. However, in contrast to Barnett and Walker's (2015) warning that reform efforts may reinforce centrality, discussions on adapting to Covid-19 and beyond have thus far been characterised by

increased inclusivity of LNNGOs. There is a more attentive audience for LNNGO voices, as illustrated through the HNPW events and increased multi-stakeholder dialogue in all focus countries.

10.2 Relational agency across the 'aid-chain'

The research paid attention to how roles and agency has been re-negotiated along the 'aid-chain' (Hilhorst, 2018) due to the altered humanitarian access landscape shaped by Covid-19. Researchers in the past have written about the impact of institutional barriers to access (Besiou & van Wassenhove, 2020; Barnett & Walker, 2015), and recognised the strategic virtue of LNNGOs (Roepstorff, 2020; Van Brabant & Parel, 2017). However, compared to previous research, the pandemic presents unparalleled access barriers due its systemic scale. The altered humanitarian response access landscape directly impacted relationship dynamics. Systemic international mobility trends combined with remote working by international organisations shifted responsibility to LNNGOs. This has facilitated improvements in sub-contracting dynamics in both Uganda and Bangladesh; whereby international partners have taken more supportive and complementary roles to responders on the ground. To this effect, INGO survey respondents identified Covid-19 as a catalyst for rethinking their own roles going forward, adding to Lewin et al.'s (2018) research into 'fundermediaries' increasingly questioning their own added-value in the sector. However, INGO respondents also identified that change needs to be facilitated by those further up the aid chain, which echoes De Torrenté's (2013) argument that power asymmetries persist at every level.

The research reinforces Cooley and Ron's (2002) theory that different 'humanitarian markets' shape different outcomes. Findings suggest that Covid-19's impact on the agency of LNNGOs was determined not only by the relationships with international humanitarian actors, but also with other national actors. In exploring this, the research has treated each humanitarian ecosystem as a political arena with a multitude of actors (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010), whilst recognising that both local and global political environments matter (Gulrajani, 2014). The research has evidenced that involvement in Covid-19 response has been contingent on relational dynamics with respective governments. Furthermore, LNNGOs in Bangladesh and Uganda both leveraged collective agency within local networks to adapt. However, in South Sudan, the fragile context and lack of strong local coordination networks hampered their ability to continue programming, or strategically leverage the new context to lead response. The research thus adds to Hilhorst's (2018) theory regarding role negotiation along the aid-chain; by encouraging researchers to also pay attention to how roles are shaped across the different levels through collective agency.

10.3 The power of discourse

The power of discourse has been a central theme in the research. Firstly, the research identified that LNNGOs unanimously perceive capacity discourse as a key power imbalance. Thus, contributing to the theoretical debates emphasising that capacity is inherently politicised (Gulrajani, 2014; Stephen, 2017; Hilhorst; 2018). It echoes Stephen's (2017) argument that LNNGO are judged 'in the image of their

northern powers'. However, the research also finds that Covid-19 has catalysed an increased evidence base illustrating the strategic virtue and competencies of LNNGOs in leading response. Consequently, it has contributed to research focusing on comparative strengths of LNNGOs (Hilhorst, 2018) and identified Covid-19 as a potential catalyst for reframing the dominant discourse.

Furthermore, the dichotomous role played by technology as both enabling and constraining has uncovered a systemic imbalance linked to funding. It illustrates the stark contrast between capacity inherent to LNNGOs on the ground, contrasted with the 'technical' capacity contingent on resources. Thus, confirming Gulrajani's (2014) emphasis that donors must recognise the social and political consequences of their aid systems. As argued by Hudson and Leftwich (2014, p.88) dominant ideas sustain and legitimise structural environments, thus also have the potential to frame prospective change outcomes. Successfully reshaping the capacity narrative could alter the subordinate status of LNNGOs by delegitimising the view that they lack capacity and promote equitable partnerships. This may afford them with more social power (through relational roles); which could culminate in greater access to both economic power (through funding) and political power (through decision-making). The potential behind reshaping the discourse should therefore not be underestimated.

However, Covid-19 has simultaneously limited the power of LNNGOs. The research confirms Olson's (2000) warning that crisis may entrench power by those who command powerful positions; they award crisis meaning and determine the resulting policies and allocation of resources. Encapsulating this trend, this thesis coins the term 'legitimacy discourse'; whereby those in powerful positions determine the legitimacy of policies informing response, and who is deemed a legitimate partner. This is clear through the GHRP for Covid-19, prescribing the funding channels for Covid-19 response. More pressingly, it is evidenced through the dependency on intermediaries which has given rise to paradox of LNNGO closures and lay-offs despite the evidenced urgency of their need on the ground. Larger LNNGOs who were deemed to have more technical capacity continued to be favoured. Health-focused partners were also favoured resulting in fund diversions. Power has thus become entrenched by those who control the process of commodity exchange at different levels (Collinson, 2003), represented by formal institutional 'de jure' power (Acemoglu et al., 2002). Consequently, Covid-19 reinforced the power of Barnett and Walker's (2015) 'Humanitarian Club' in controlling the discourse that shapes resource flows and policies.

10.4 Systemic shift of power means also looking outside the traditional system

The findings suggest that a genuine systemic shift of power means also looking outside the system. This may sound paradoxical, yet it echoes past research. For example, Spiegel (2017) argued the importance that those in power renounce their authority and hold on funding. Similarly. Barnett and Walker (2015) hypothesised that true reform for shifting power rests outside dominant systemic structures offered by non-traditional actors. This is confirmed in both Uganda and Bangladesh, where Covid-19 has been identified as a tipping point for addressing the pre-existing 'path dependencies' (Shapiro and Bedi,

2007, as cited in Hudson and Leftwich, 2014) on intermediaries. Funding leveraged through for example the private sector and non-UN based pooled funding mechanism (ELNAH, Start Fund) have proven to be efficient sources for resource mobilisation. Furthermore, the virtue of local networks and collaboration, especially in Bangladesh, have illustrated the adaptability of local humanitarian action, outside the confines of the traditional system. Given these findings, one could come to the same conclusion as Gómez (2021, p.1347), that reform should focus on how local actors are transforming humanitarian response themselves, rather than international actors.

However, South Sudan offers a stark contrast to the other two countries regarding adaptability of LNNGOs during Covid-19. Consequently, it is important to recognise that the nature of crises also matters, whereby conflict or fragile states may lack feasible alternatives in regards to resource mobilisation. Therefore, alternative pathways for transformation should not be equated with an outright rejection of reform to traditional structures. In contrast, all interviewees still emphasise the need for structural funding reform as the scale of traditional humanitarian assistance is unparalleled. The onus is therefore on removing the 'fundermediary' layer which compromises ownership and quality by enabling access to direct funding. To clarify, interviewees clearly stipulated that a shift of power to LNNGOs should not be regarded as the antithesis to international humanitarian actors. Instead, it is about promoting complementary partnerships rather than ones based on subordinate dependency, as emphasised by Roepstorff (2020).

This is pivotal as participants from all three countries echoed a unified message; the prevailing dependency culture not only compromises the agency of LNNGOs but it also stifles development prospects. Desire to counter this was most urgently expressed in Bangladesh, where international domination was seen to actively counter development. South Sudanese participants also raised the harmful implication of relying solely on external assistance instead of promoting the use of local capacities, as evidenced by the gap left by international actors during Covid-19. This thesis therefore seeks to actively contribute to debates centred on strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus; through promotion of locally-rooted initiatives (Barakat and Milton, 2020; De Torrenté, 2013) and recognition of the potential of local systems and leadership for more sustainable response (Chandler, 2015; Hilhorst, 2018).

10.5 Contribution to the localisation debate

Lastly, the thesis seeks to outline its contribution to the localisation debate based on analysis of its application across the three countries, the INGO survey and secondary sources. Firstly, localisation is widely understood both as a process and an outcome; it seeks to shift power to LNNGOs as a means to make humanitarian aid more effective. However, findings reaffirm that localisation should be viewed as contextual and relational (MacGinty, 2015; Roepstorff, 2020). In Bangladesh the localisation pathway is predominantly nationally-driven, in Uganda it is complementary between INGOs and LNNGOs, whereas in South Sudan, there is a lack of clear collective agency in driving the agenda. As

a result, countries also stress different components as the most important. In Bangladesh there is an emphasis on respecting local structures, in Uganda the priority is equitable partnerships with international actors, whereas in South Sudan the focus is predominantly on funding.

Most pressingly, findings echo that the structural commitments to channel more funding to LNNGOs have failed yet again. Therefore, as argued by Steets et al. (2016), is it pivotal that vague definitions and operationalisations are overcome. This is particularly relevant given that Covid-19 has refocused attention to the Grand Bargain reform agenda. The policy implication of this research is therefore that if donors are genuine in their commitments to honour 'localisation' reform, they must also adapt the funding structures to ensure they are suitable. The findings in Chapter 5 identified that LNNGOs experience the current channels as too competitive, and that due-diligence criteria for obtaining access to direct funding is often inherently biased against LNNGOs. Simultaneously, findings from South Sudan evidenced that the SSHF pooled fund was instrumental during Covid-19 but remains inaccessible to most LNNGOs. In order for reform to be realised, dialogue must include responders on the ground. 'Localisation' of traditional humanitarian aid cannot be achieved if the actors along the entire aid-chain are not involved in designing its solutions.

10.6 Critical reflection on results

It is important to reflect on how biases and omissions (3.4.2) have influenced the results. The research would have benefited from speaking to a wider range of humanitarian actors situated within the specific focus countries, but this access could not be obtained. In particular, speaking to international partners, such as UN multilaterals in South Sudan or INGOs in Bangladesh would have significantly improved the reliability and appraisal of how relationship dynamics within the political economies have changed. Although the research prioritised 'perspectives from the ground', country-specific insights are limited to the experiences of LNNGOs, which is considered the main limitation of the research. Given the opportunity, researchers in the future should endeavour to speak to as many stakeholders as possible within each country, including donors, to obtain more comprehensive oversight. Secondly, it is worth re-iterating that INGO respondents were likely biased towards actors who are most committed to transformative change in the sector, thus should not be regarded as representative beyond the sample. However, they still enable valuable insight on significance attributed to Covid-19. Finally, given that the humanitarian system's adaptation to Covid-19 is still evolving, the research cannot definitively conclude whether it presents a political opportunity for catalysing systemic change. It is able to take stock of momentum for change, and whether structural changes have already happened, but a definitive conclusion would be premature.

11. Conclusion

The research aimed to explore whether Covid-19 has played a role in shifting power to LNNGOs in South Sudan, Uganda and Bangladesh by employing an original analytical framework. Covid-19's relevance has been successfully situated within a comprehensive understanding of the unique humanitarian political economies, from the perspective of LNNGOs. These insights are complemented by a wider systemic overview, obtained through the INGO survey and analysis of secondary sources. Sub-questions were designed to build on one another (Chapters 5-9), culminating in the ability to answer the key research question: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the agency of LNNGOs in humanitarian response and to what extent does it present a 'political opportunity' for shifting power to LNNGOs?*

Findings identified that LNNGOs perceive their subordinate treatment as a combined product of inequitable access to funding and a biased capacity discourse. The Covid-19 context heightened systemic reliance on LNNGOs, resulting in a wealth of evidence illustrating the comparative advantages of LNNGOs. This has forced a reckoning to shift the capacity discourse, and translated into improved relational power dynamics between international and local actors. However, inequitable access to funding has been sustained, and even exacerbated in some regards.

In Uganda, LNNGO agency improved through increased complementarity and decision-making in partnerships. Covid-19 created a platform to catalyse multi-stakeholder collaboration for driving the 'localisation' agenda forward in-country. In Bangladesh, the most significant improvement is attributed to increased international recognition and respect for local coordination of response. This actively counters the key factor marginalising LNNGOs pre-Covid. In both countries, collective agency also increased amongst LNNGOs through local networks and consortia. Although this is not novel in Bangladesh, it has been identified as instrumental going forward in Uganda. However, the situating in South Sudan is not as positive. LNNGOs deemed to have strong capacity by international partners were offered opportunities to lead response, benefited from increased multi-stakeholder dialogue and pooled funding. However, the majority of LNNGOs were further marginalised due to the dependency on international partners to operate. Furthermore, 'fundermediary' dependency compromised the agency of LNNGOs across all contexts.

Addressing the extent to which Covid-19 presents a political opportunity is complex due to the temporal dimension of the impact as still evolving. Consequently, conclusions reflect on changes to-date. In Uganda, incentives for change have increased but are deemed contingent on structural funding changes. However, as discussed in 10.1, economic structures are not the only determinant for shifting power. Therefore, the catalysed multi-stakeholder mobilisation of the 'localisation' agenda combined with novel resource mobilisation strategies may still culminate in change. In Bangladesh, there is increased momentum that Covid-19 may shift power to LNNGOs outside the confines of the traditional system.

There is enthusiasm to leverage alternative resources, and sever the dependency culture to ensure the power and agency of LNNGOs remains protected. However, these changes have not yet manifested at systemic scale. The answer is more straight-forward in regards to South Sudan. Covid-19 has not presented a political opportunity, but instead sustained the status-quo.

Finally, taking a wider systemic look, INGOs and donors have identified Covid-19 as increasing incentives and political will to effect change. This is contingent on structural changes to funding, which has not manifested yet. However, there is undoubtedly momentum amongst all humanitarian actors along the aid-chain that Covid-19 may still mobilise change. Consequently, it would be premature to definitively conclude whether Covid-19 will become a political opportunity. It remains to be seen whether the 'talk' will translate into 'walk'.

11.1 Areas for further research

Building on the baseline established by this research, the thesis concludes by making specific recommendations for future research in two key areas. Firstly, at the systemic scale, it would be interesting to research whether (and how) the current momentum for systemic change is translated into practice, once the effects of the pandemic have stabilised. This requires attention to structural changes to funding (or lack thereof). For example, Covid-19 already culminated in the CERF pilot for direct funding to LNNGOs, which should be researched further. As stated in 10.5, it is also essential to consider whether LNNGOs are involved in the process of adapting funding mechanisms. Furthermore, research into the nature of new systemic policy agendas (such as the Grand Bargain 2.0, currently being developed) and LNNGO perceptions on these will also enable valuable insight into the nature of change. These recommendations contribute to the same research gap that inspired this thesis; bridging the researcher-practitioner realm to help inform effective reform (Besiou and van Wassenhove, 2020, p.136). As evidenced through this research, more equitable distribution of power in humanitarian response is inherently linked to development prospects.

Secondly, research into alternatives outside the traditional system and how these are leveraged will provide useful insight into the pathways for change that are not dependent on international actors. For example, by researching how alternative resource mobilisation strategies have been leveraged in Bangladesh and Uganda. This should pay particular attention to private sector funding, which has been identified as instrumental going forward. As emphasised in the research, Covid-19 has increased the appetite to sever dependency and instead promote more sustainable and resilient response; it is worthwhile dedicating research to the local initiatives that may culminate from this.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduction

- ✓ Brief intro about myself & thank participants for their time
- ✓ Objective of the research
- ✓ Anonymity & consent statement

Opening Question

Note: only one opening question needed - this question quickly established rapport.

1. To start off, can you briefly tell me a bit about your organisation and role?
    i. Involvement in NGO networks? Localisation networks?

Humanitarian coordination mechanisms

2. I was wondering if you can give me an overview of how humanitarian coordination mechanisms operate in X?
    i. Role of different actors: government/ INGOs and other international actors
    ii. Role and influence of LNNGOs in these mechanisms?

3. How were the platforms leveraged for Covid-19 response?
    i. HCTT versus locally-driven platforms?
    ii. Role of different actors: gov/ INGOs / LNNGOs

Covid-19

4. How did Covid-19 impact your organisation?
    i. Involvement in Covid-19 response?

5. Can you tell me about how Covid-19 impacted the humanitarian response ecosystem more generally?
    i. Access? International actors? Involvement of government?

Localisation

6. As you probably know, the term 'localisation' has been subject to debate and discussion with various adaptations, so I was wondering what your perspective is on what 'localisation' means?
    i. Who it includes (who are the 'local')? Problems it seeks to address? Involvement?

7. How do you think the pandemic crisis has affected the issues/barriers to localisation you mentioned?
    i. Positively / Negatively?

Partnerships

8. What is your experience with actors from the international humanitarian community to date?
    i. Partnerships? Quality (equitable / subcontractor)? Dialogue?
    ii. Different actors: INGO/ UN agencies

9. How have relationship dynamics with international actors been affected by Covid-19?
    i. International access? Roles?
    ii. Support? Funding? Remote management?

10. How has Covid-19 impacted the ownership of decision-making for local NGOs in programming?
    i. Local designs and decisions? Input? Dynamics?

Funding

11. Can you tell me what the main funding mechanisms are for local actors in your country?
    i. Pooled funding mechanisms? Intermediaries?

12. I am aware that the international community has made a lot of references regarding increased reliance on local and national actors, and on embedding localisation in Covid-19 response, such as the GHRP and various guidance notes, echoing the Grand Bargain commitments of increasing direct funding. In your view, has there been an increased transfer of resources?
    i. Pooled funding via CERF/CBPF? Compared to pre-Covid?
    ii. Quality of funding via partners: more direct/flexible?

Impact

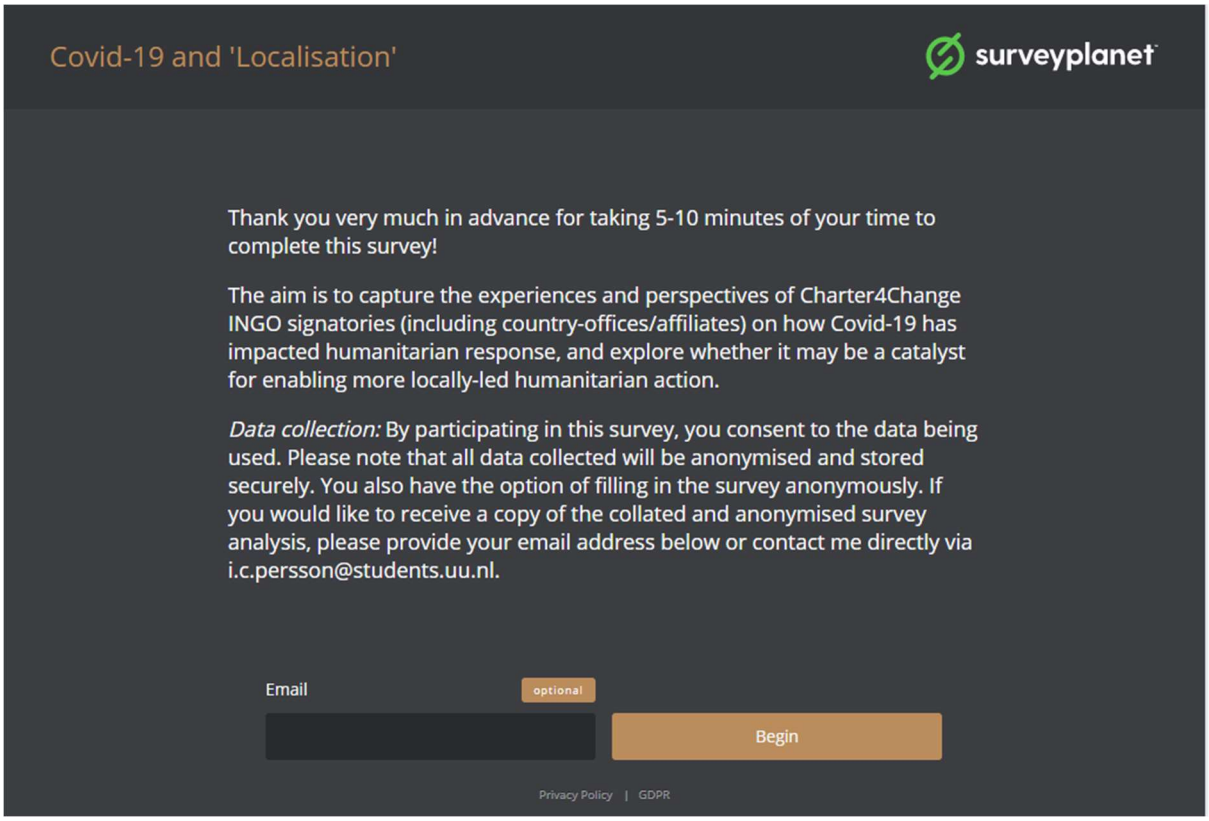
13. What has been the most positive impact of Covid-19 on locally-led response/ localisation?
    i. Visibility? Recognition? Influence? Leadership? Coordination?
    ii. Most negative?

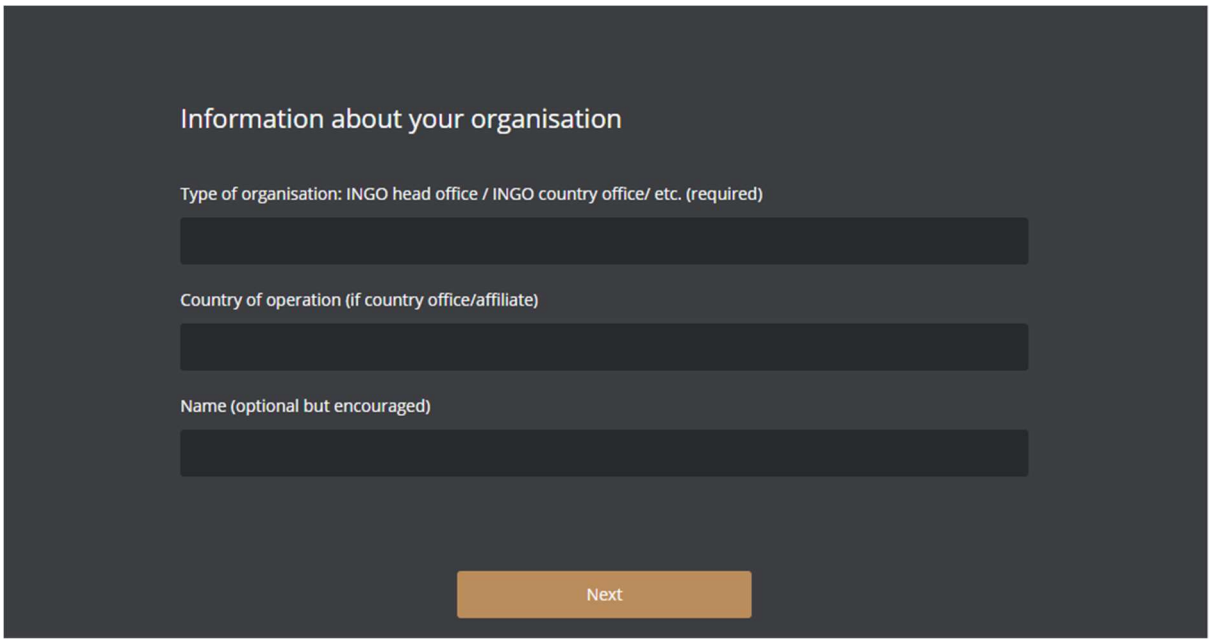
14. Do you think Covid-19 will speed up progress on localisation commitments by the international community?
    i. Shift in dynamics? Increased momentum? Changed narrative? Lessons?

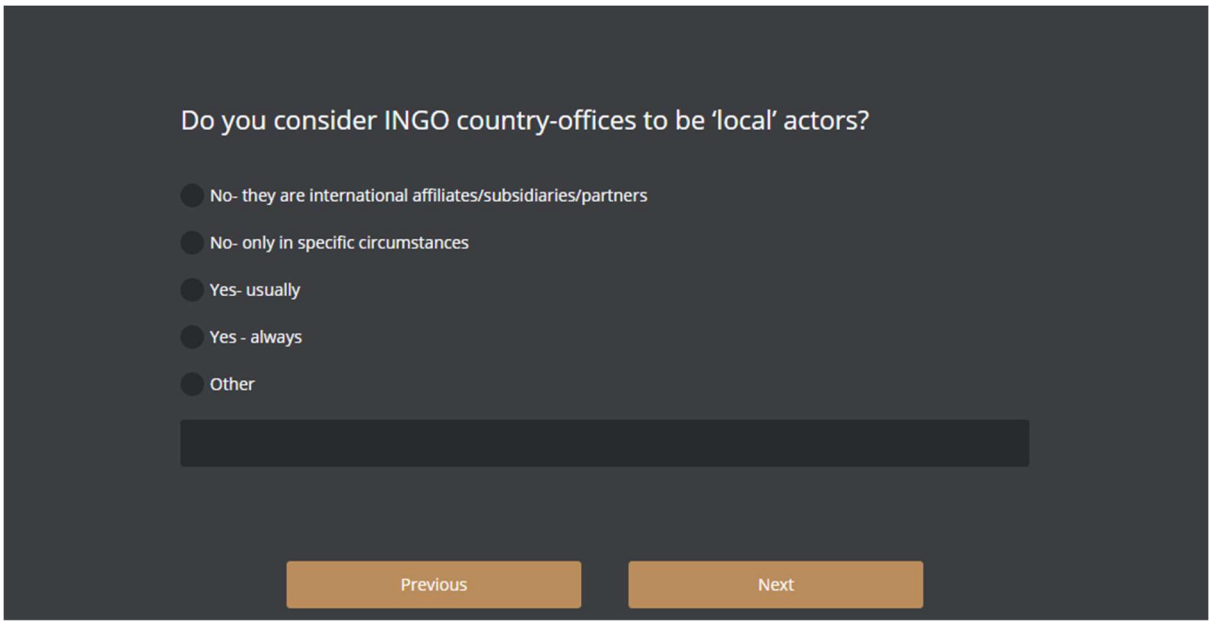
Closing questions- wider reflections

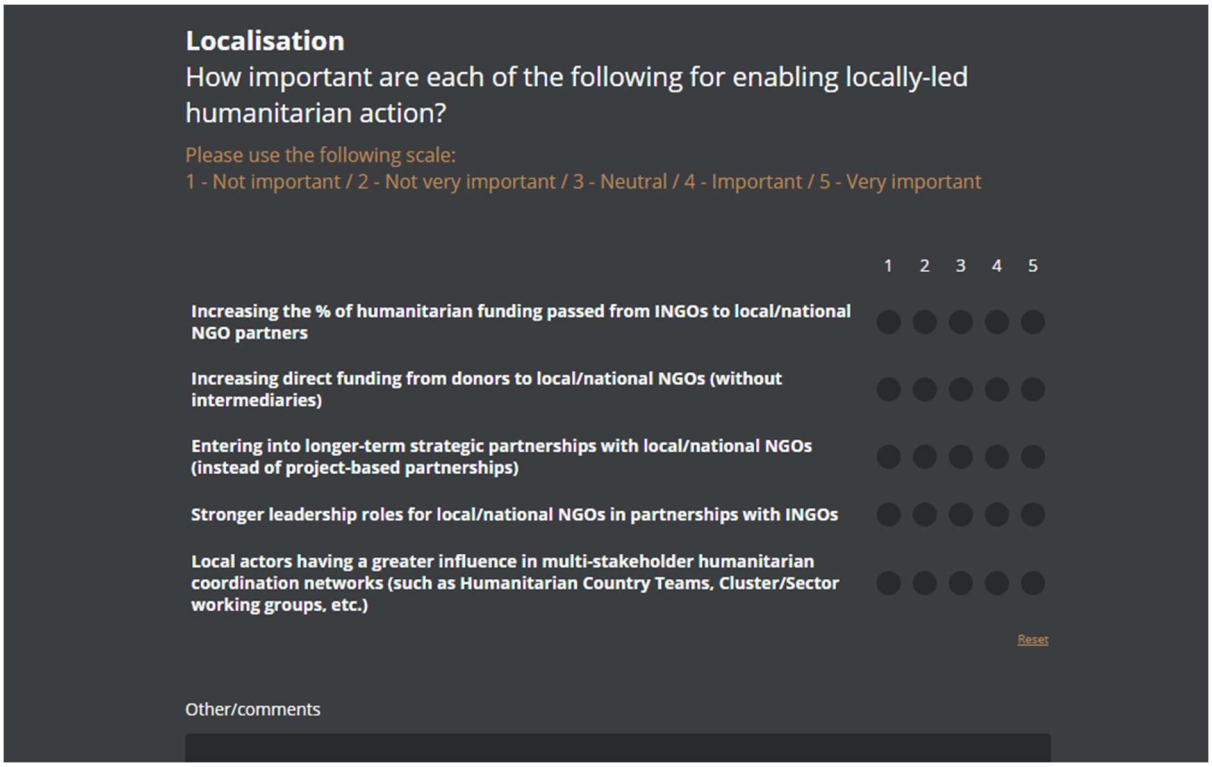
15. What needs to be done to push to localisation agenda forward?
    i. Main challenges?

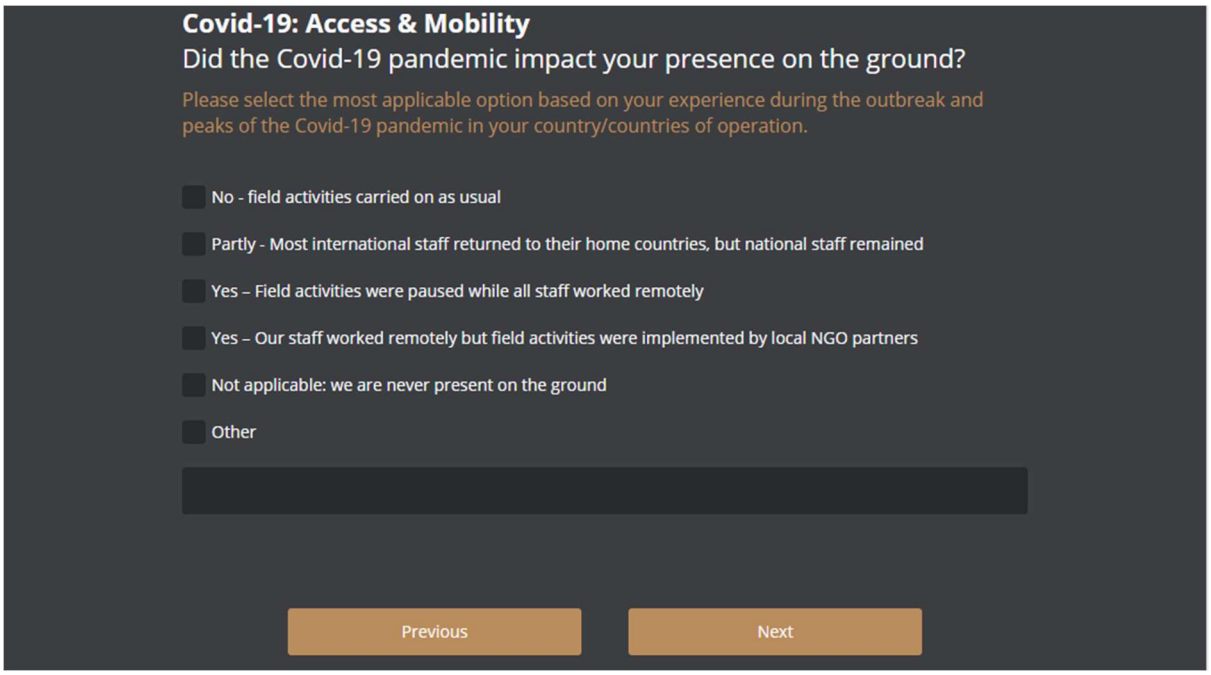
Appendix 2: INGO Survey



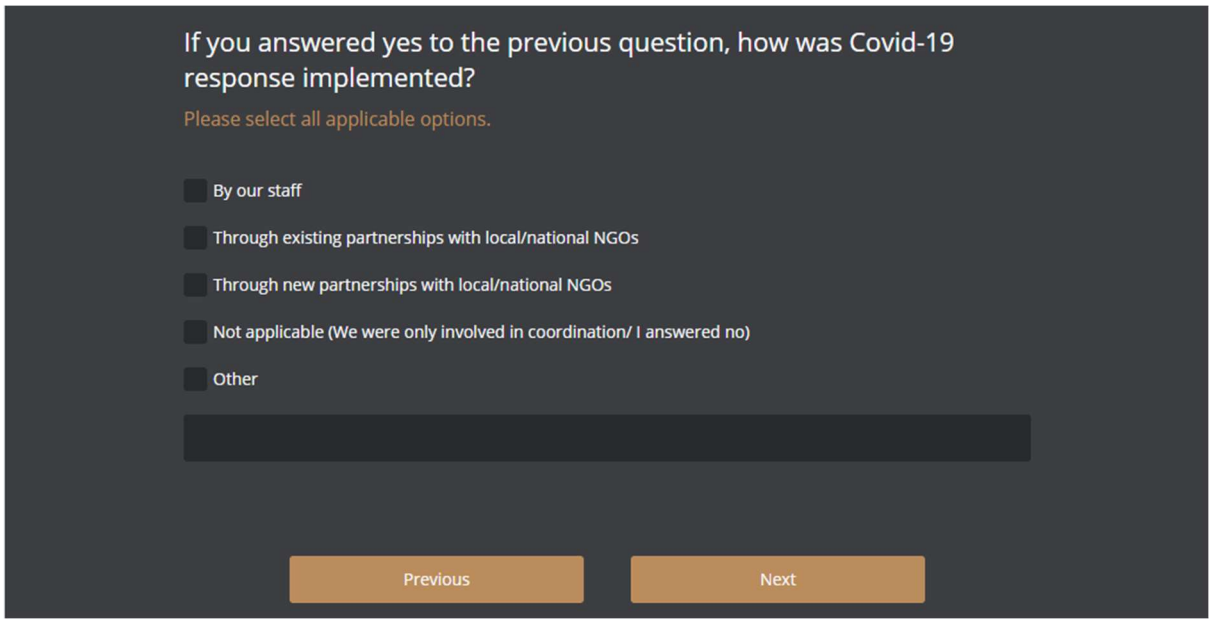


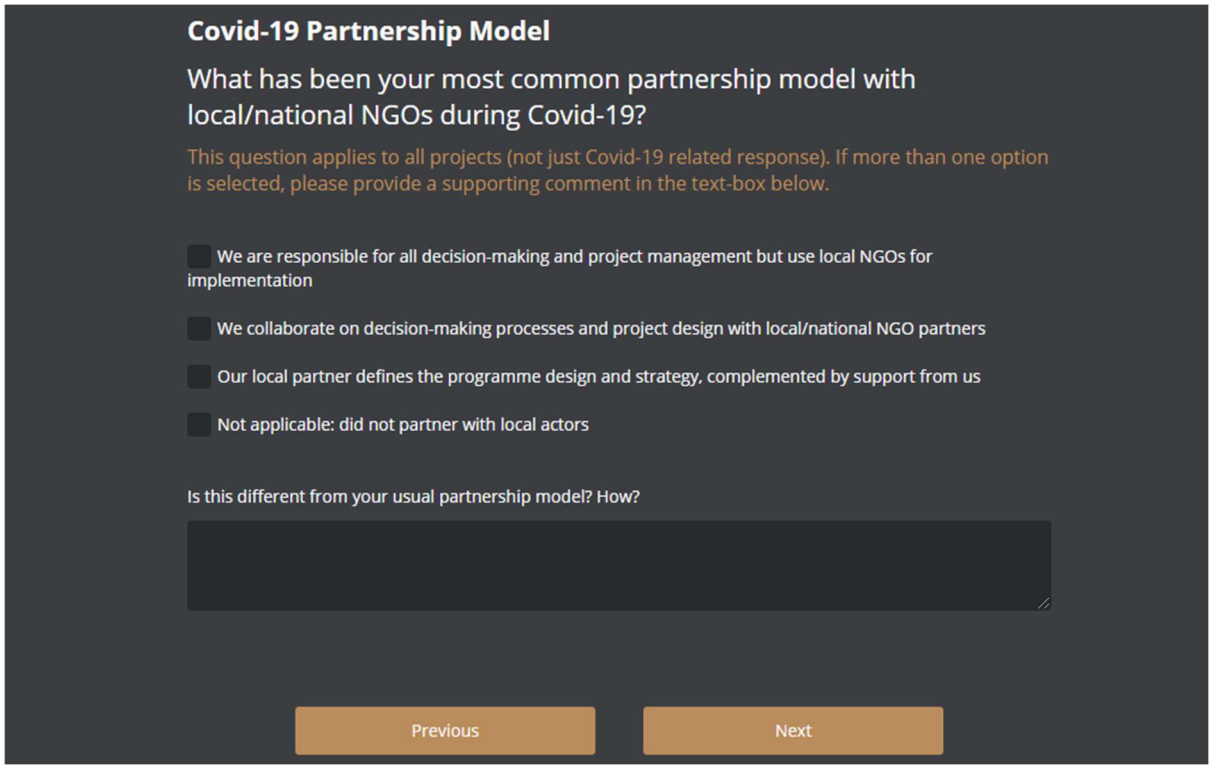

Do you consider INGO country-offices to be 'local' actors?
No- they are international affiliates/subsidiaries/partners
No- only in specific circumstances
Yes- usually
Yes - always
Other
Previous
Next

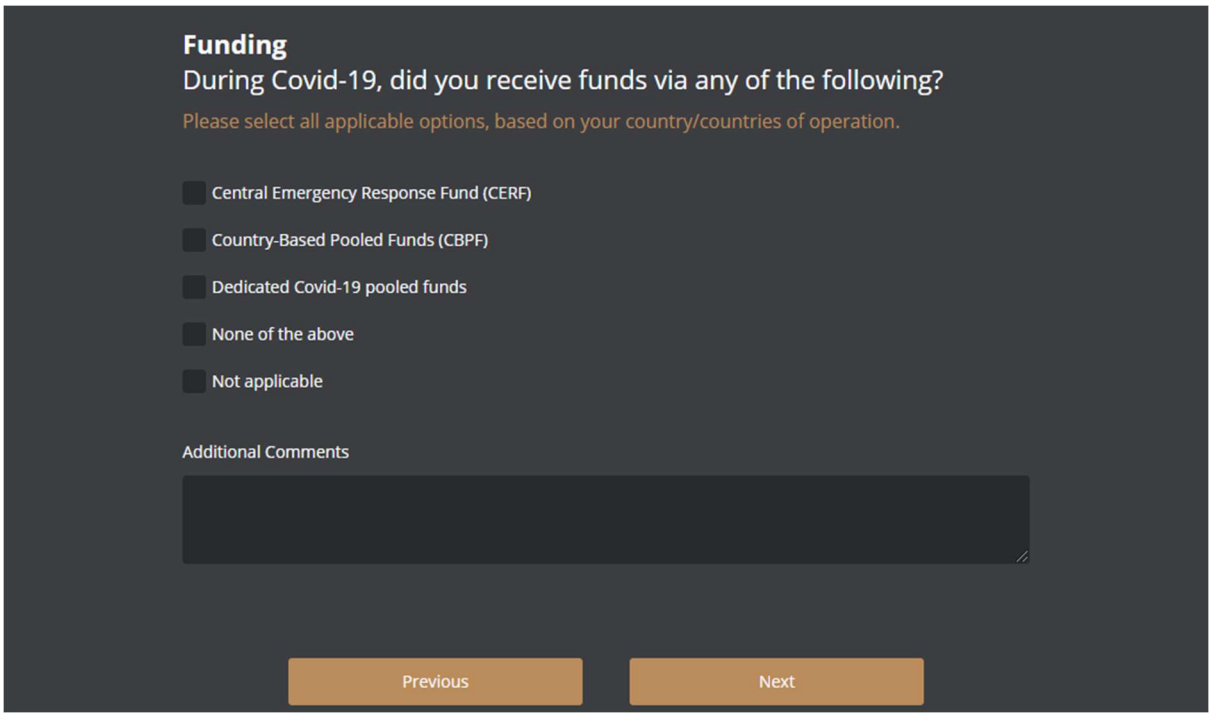

Localisation
How important are each of the following for enabling locally-led humanitarian action?
Please use the following scale:
1 - Not important / 2 - Not very important / 3 - Neutral / 4 - Important / 5 - Very important
1 2 3 4 5
Increasing the % of humanitarian funding passed from INGOs to local/national NGO partners
Increasing direct funding from donors to local/national NGOs (without intermediaries)
Entering into longer-term strategic partnerships with local/national NGOs (instead of project-based partnerships)
Stronger leadership roles for local/national NGOs in partnerships with INGOs
Local actors having a greater influence in multi-stakeholder humanitarian coordination networks (such as Humanitarian Country Teams, Cluster/Sector working groups, etc.)
Reset
Other/comments

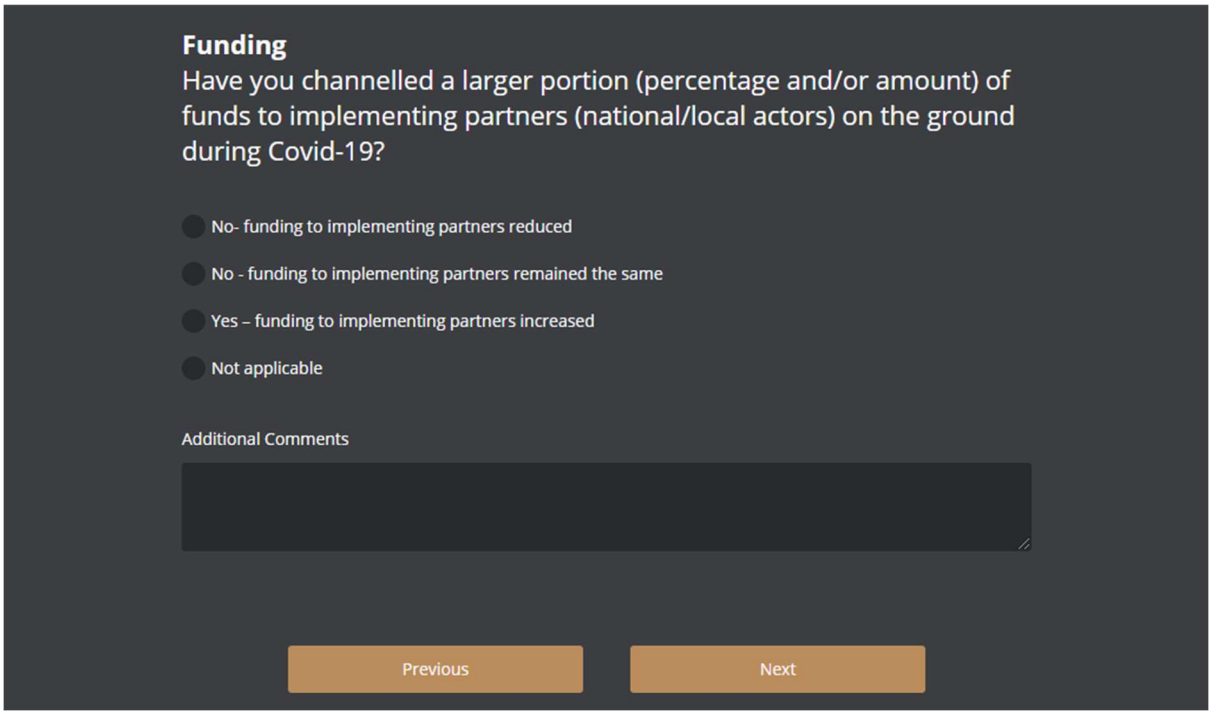

Covid-19: Access & Mobility
Did the Covid-19 pandemic impact your presence on the ground?
Please select the most applicable option based on your experience during the outbreak and peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic in your country/countries of operation.
No - field activities carried on as usual
Partly - Most international staff returned to their home countries, but national staff remained
Yes – Field activities were paused while all staff worked remotely
Yes – Our staff worked remotely but field activities were implemented by local NGO partners
Not applicable: we are never present on the ground
Other
Previous
Next


Has your organisation been involved in Covid-19 related response?
Please select all applicable options.
Yes – Covid-19 response has been embedded in existing programmatic activities
Yes – Covid-19 initiatives have been implemented in addition to existing programmatic activities
Yes - Involved in multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms dedicated to Covid-19 response, led by local/national governments (such as Taskforces)
No
Other
Previous
Next


If you answered yes to the previous question, how was Covid-19 response implemented?
Please select all applicable options.
By our staff
Through existing partnerships with local/national NGOs
Through new partnerships with local/national NGOs
Not applicable (We were only involved in coordination/ I answered no)
Other
Previous
Next


Covid-19 Partnership Model
What has been your most common partnership model with local/national NGOs during Covid-19?
This question applies to all projects (not just Covid-19 related response). If more than one option is selected, please provide a supporting comment in the text-box below.
We are responsible for all decision-making and project management but use local NGOs for implementation
We collaborate on decision-making processes and project design with local/national NGO partners
Our local partner defines the programme design and strategy, complemented by support from us
Not applicable: did not partner with local actors
Is this different from your usual partnership model? How?
Previous
Next


Funding
During Covid-19, did you receive funds via any of the following?
Please select all applicable options, based on your country/countries of operation.
Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)
Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF)
Dedicated Covid-19 pooled funds
None of the above
Not applicable
Additional Comments
Previous
Next


Funding
Have you channelled a larger portion (percentage and/or amount) of funds to implementing partners (national/local actors) on the ground during Covid-19?
No- funding to implementing partners reduced
No - funding to implementing partners remained the same
Yes – funding to implementing partners increased
Not applicable
Additional Comments
Previous
Next

Localisation Commitments

Please use the scale below to specify how COVID-19 has impacted your efforts to:

1- Significantly slowed progress / 2 - Slowed progress / 3- No impact / 4- Increased rate of progress / 5- Significantly increased rate of progress

	1	2	3	4	5
Strengthen partnerships with local actors	○	○	○	○	○
Emphasise the importance of national actors to humanitarian donors	○	○	○	○	○
Ensure equality in programmatic decision-making between INGOs and local partners	○	○	○	○	○
Provide organisational support and capacity building	○	○	○	○	○
Promote the role of local actors to the media and public	○	○	○	○	○

Reset

Supporting statements encouraged but optional:

Covid-19's impact on locally-led response

Please use the scale below to provide your perspective on the following statements:

1- Strongly disagree / 2- Disagree / 3- Neutral (no change) / 4- Agree / 5- Strongly agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Covid-19 has increased the recognition and visibility of national/local NGOs in humanitarian response	○	○	○	○	○
Covid-19 has evidenced that local NGOs are able to deliver effective and efficient humanitarian response	○	○	○	○	○
The Covid-19 context (access and mobility restrictions for international partners) has increased the leadership roles of local/national NGO partners in programme design and delivery	○	○	○	○	○
Local actors have had greater influence in multi-stakeholder humanitarian coordination networks (such as Humanitarian Country Teams, Cluster/Sector working groups, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Multi-stakeholder dialogue between donors, INGOs and local actors has increased	○	○	○	○	○

Reset

Supporting statements encouraged but optional.

Localisation Commitments

The 2017 'Shifting The Power' paper titled 'Localisation of Aid: are INGOs Walking the Talk?' states *"there is always the possibility that a major shock will catalyze transformative change" (p.14)* for shifting power to local actors.

Do you think Covid-19 may be this 'major shock'? Please provide a supporting statement.

- ○ No – Covid-19 has harmed localisation
- ○ No – Covid-19 has not impacted localisation
- ○ Yes- Covid-19 will speed up progress on localisation
- ○ Yes – Covid-19 will significantly speed up progress on localisation

Supporting statement : how has Covid-19 impacted localisation positively/negatively?

Previous Next

Partnership Role

Our role as INGOs/INGO country offices in partnerships with local/national NGOs should be to:

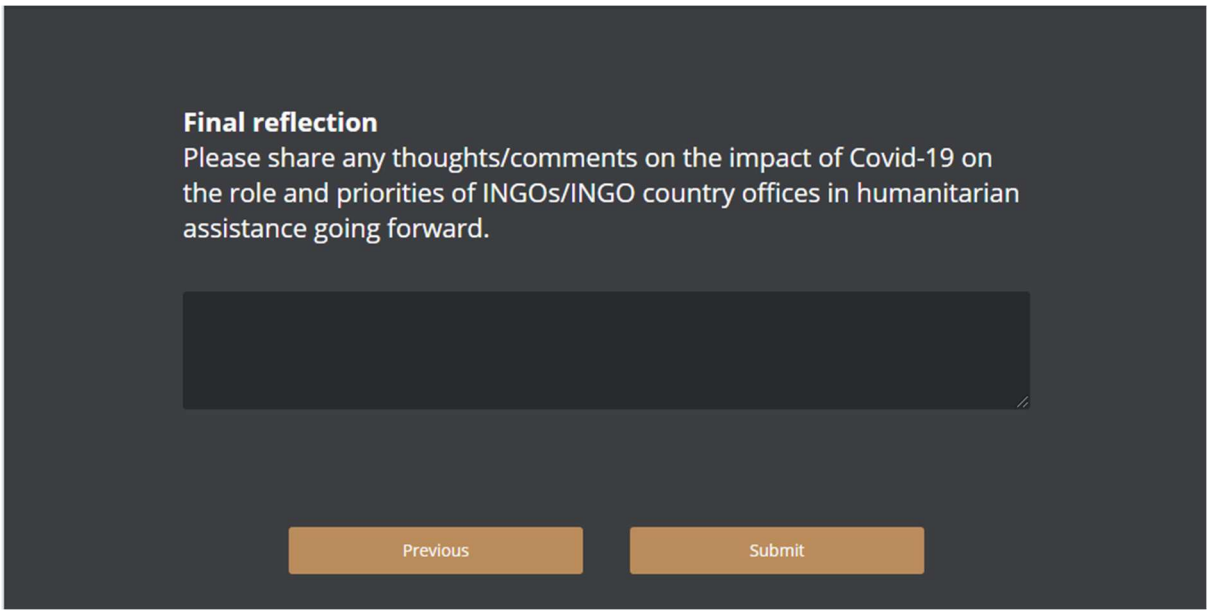
Please use the following scale for each statement:

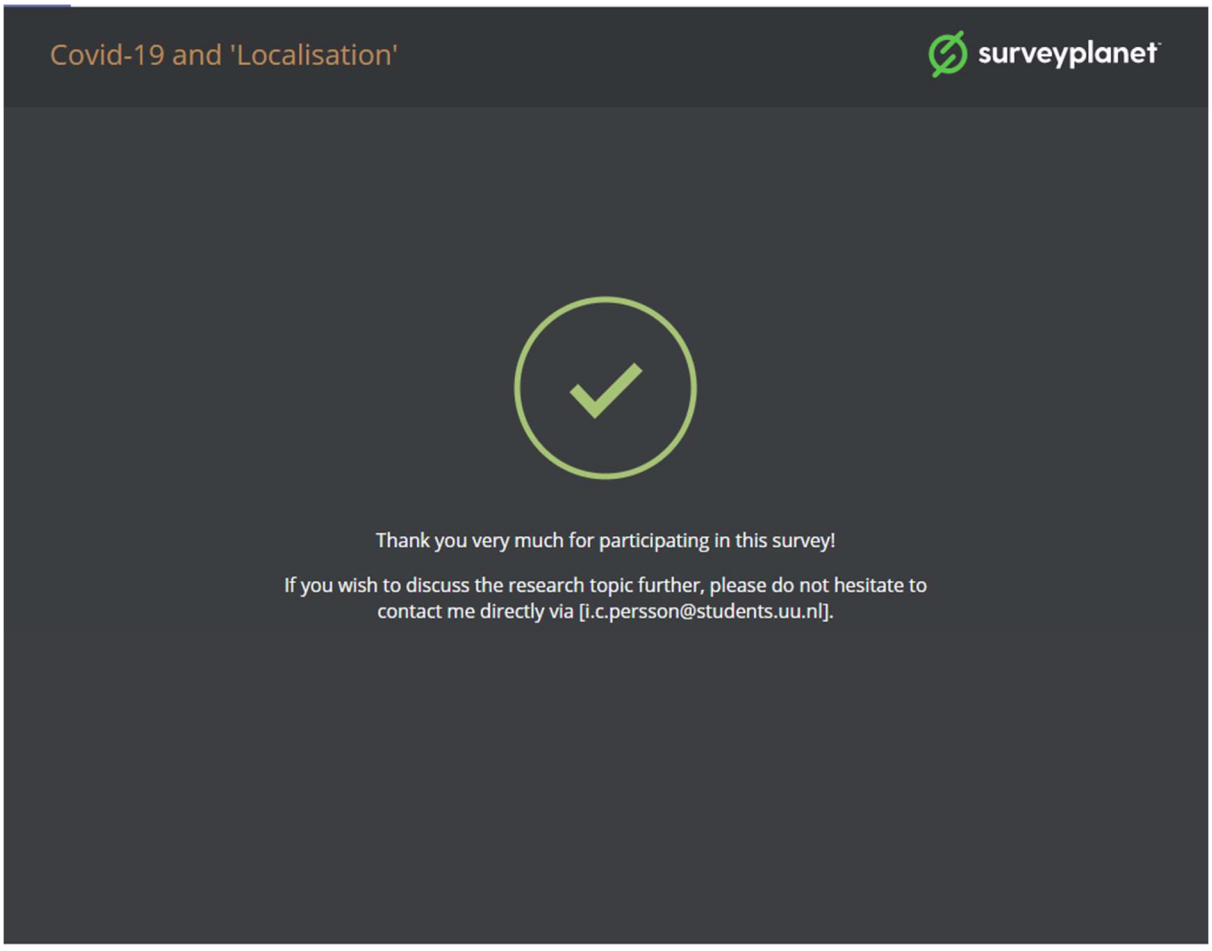
1- Strongly disagree / 2- Disagree / 3- Neutral / 4- Agree / 5- Strongly agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Provide capacity-strengthening support	○	○	○	○	○
Monitor activities implemented by local/national NGOs	○	○	○	○	○
Implement activities/response on the ground	○	○	○	○	○
Have primary ownership over the design of programmatic activities	○	○	○	○	○
Have primary ownership over budgeting decisions	○	○	○	○	○
Facilitate more direct engagement between our donors and local NGO partners	○	○	○	○	○
Invest in capacity-strengthening of local/national NGO partners	○	○	○	○	○

Reset

Other/comments


Final reflection
Please share any thoughts/comments on the impact of Covid-19 on the role and priorities of INGOs/INGO country offices in humanitarian assistance going forward.
Previous
Submit


Covid-19 and 'Localisation'
surveyplanet
Thank you very much for participating in this survey!
If you wish to discuss the research topic further, please do not hesitate to contact me directly via [i.c.persson@students.uu.nl].

Appendix 3: Humanitarian Network and Partnerships Weeks webinars

Webinar title	Date	Panel/ Speakers
HNPW Official Opening Session	19-Apr	Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) Ambassador Manuel Bessler, Deputy Director General Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Head of Swiss Humanitarian Aid (FDFA) / Federal Council Delegate for Humanitarian Aid Ms. Edem Wosornu, Chief of the Response Support Branch (RSB), Coordination Division, OCHA Moderator: Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Head, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) secretariat and Chief, Inter-Agency Support Branch (IASB)
Localisation in practice: driving forward diverse and locally-led humanitarian action	21-Apr	Ms Samar Muhareb, ARDD Mr Hugo Icuperen, ASECSA Mr Matthew Cogan, Irish Aid Ms Anita Kattakuzhy, OXFAM Ms Bhavya Srinivasan, Start Network
Centering local leadership in humanitarian coordination – A dialogue between national civil society networks and international coordination actors	22-Apr	*National/local NGOs:* Puji Pujiono, Indonesian Development and Humanitarian Alliance Gloria Soma, Titi Foundation, South Sudan Dr Aisha Thawab, Yemen Civil Society Organisations Union *Donors/ UN agencies:* Hilde Salvesen, Policy Director at the Section for Humanitarian Affairs at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Stephen Williams, Humanitarian Adviser (Localisation & Humanitarian Reform), Humanitarian & Stabilisation Operations Team, FCDO Philimon Majwa, Humanitarian Policy Specialist at UNICEF
Strengthening Participation, Representation, and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms	26-Apr	Stella Ogunlade, Chief of UNHCR's NGO and Civil Society section Dulmar Farah, IASC Research Group 1 sub-group on localization co-chair; Partnerships and Grants Manager at the Somali NGO consortium Ms. Marina Skuric Prodanovic, Chief of the System-wide Approaches and Practices Section in the Coordination Division of OCHA. Mr. Filiep Decorte, Chief (oic) of UN-Habitat's Programme Development Branch
Localisation is imperative for Accountability to Affected People	27-Apr	Session moderator: Bonaventure Gbétoho Sokpoh, SeniorAdvisor on CHS and Outreach, CHS Alliance *Mini session 1:*

		Wonder Mufunda, Center for Humanitarian Analytics (CHA), Sphere Focal Point in Zimbabwe; Rehema Kajungu, Deputy Country Director, TPO Uganda; and Iqbal Uddin, Joint Director, COAST Trust, Bangladesh Facilitated by Shama Mall, Deputy Regional Director, Programs & Organizational Development, Community World Service Asia (CWSA), Pakistan *Mini-session 2:* Miracle Adesina, Country Coordinator, Slum and Rural Health Initiative Network (SRHIN), Nigeria; Ahmed Ibrahim Abdi, Chief Executive Officer, Aldef, Convener ASAL Humanitarian Network, Kenya; Hamza Alobid, MEAL Coordinator, IYD, Syria; and Nourhan Alfayoumi, Accountability Coordinator, World Vision Syria response Facilitated by Fatima Yamin, Manager Programme Development, Strengthening Participatory Organization, Pakistan

Appendix 4: Simplified coding list

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Participant data	Organisational info	
	Strategic characteristics	
Pre Covid	Localisation	Definition
		Pathway
		Policy versus practice
	Wider ecosystem	Government relationship
		Coordination
	Local collaboration	Forums
		Civil society
	International actors	Sub-contractors
		Inequitable funding
		Capacity narrative
		Dependency
		Inconsistent commitment to localisation
Covid-19 operational	Mobility and access barriers	Strategic positioning
		Technology
	Response initiatives	
	International retreat vs. local commitment	
	Non-covid shocks	
Covid-19 power	Resources	Funding
		Dependency exacerbated
		Local resource mobilisation
	Roles	Local strategic positioning
		International support
		Local coordination and consortiums
		Sub-contracting
	Capacity narrative	Increased evidence base
		Recognition
		Pre-existing inequalities manifested
Covid-19 opportunity	Catalyst	Evidence-base & recognition
		Donor engagement
		Local leadership
	Alternatives	

	Hum-dev nexus	
	Increased localisation activism	
	Negative	Status-quo maintained